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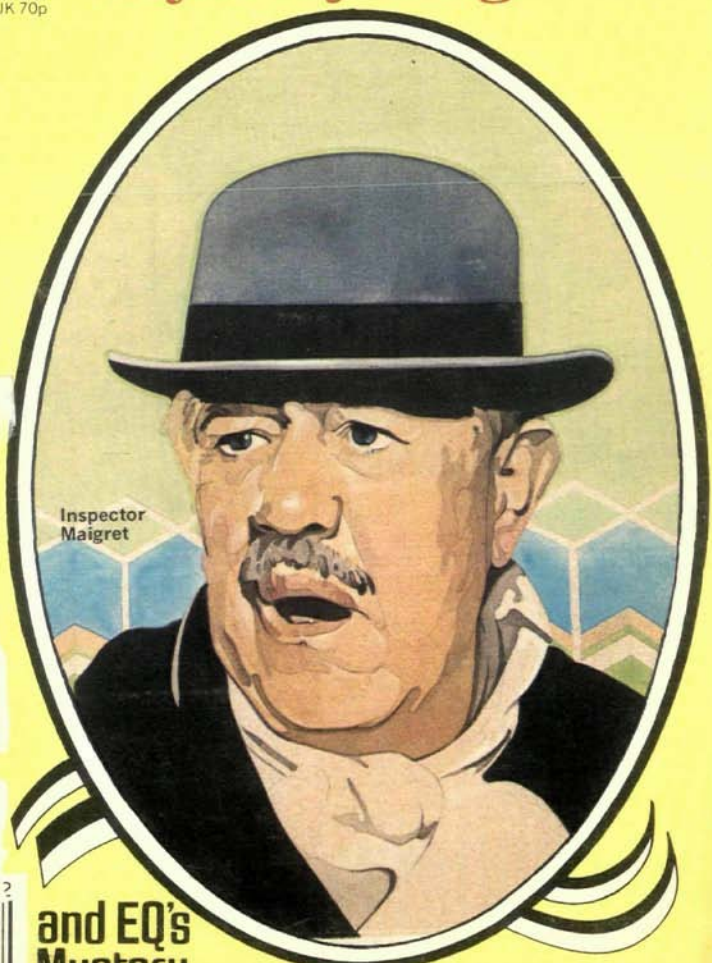

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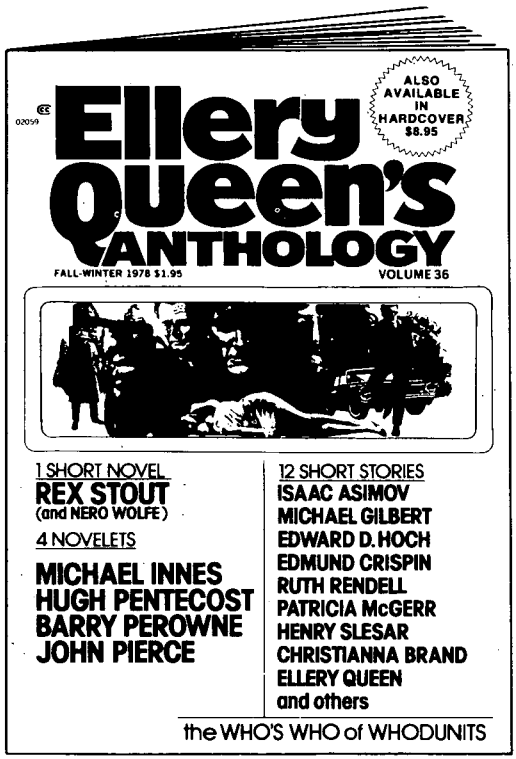

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PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER: *Joel Davis* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 72, No. 6, Whole No. 421, DEC., 1978. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.25 a copy. Annual subscription $15.00 in U.S.A. and possessions; $17.00 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017, (212) 949-9190. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, Ct. 06835. Second-class postage paid at N.Y., N.Y., and additional mailing offices. © *1978 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE ® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope, the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.*

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REASONS UNKNOWN

by STANLEY ELLIN

This is what happened, starting that Saturday in October.

That morning Morrison's wife needed the station wagon for the kids, so Morrison took the interstate bus into downtown Manhattan. At the terminal there, hating to travel by subway, he got into a cab. When the cabbie turned around and asked, "Where to, Mister?" Morrison did a double take. "Slade?" he said. "Bill Slade?"

"You better believe it," said the cabbie. "So it's Larry Morrison. Well, what do you know."

Now, what Morrison knew was that up to two or three years ago, Slade had been—as he himself still was—one of the several thousand comfortably-fixed bees hiving in the glass-and-aluminum Majestico complex in Greenbush, New Jersey. There were 80,000 Majestico employees around the world, but the Greenbush complex was the flagship of the works, the executive division. And Slade had been there a long, long time, moving up to an assistant managership on the departmental level.

Then the department was wiped out in a reorganizational crunch, and Slade, along with some others in it, had been handed

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his severance money and his hat. No word had come back from him after he finally sold his house and pulled out of town with his wife and kid to line up, as he put it, something good elsewhere. It was a shock to Morrison to find that the something good elsewhere meant tooling a cab around Manhattan.

He said in distress, "Jeez, I didn't know, Bill—none of the Hillcrest Road bunch had any idea—"

"That's what I was hoping for, " said Slade. "It's all right, man. I always had a feeling I'd sooner or later meet up with one of the old bunch. Now that it happened, I'm just as glad it's you." A horn sounding behind the cab prompted Slade to get it moving. "Where to, Larry?"

"Columbus Circle. The Coliseum."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. The Majestico Trade Exposition. It's that time of the year, right?"

"Right," said Morrison.

"And it's good politics to show up, right? Maybe one of the brass'll take notice."

"You know how it is, Bill."

"I sure do." Slade pulled up at a red light and looked around at Morrison. "Say, you're not in any tearing hurry, are you? You could have time for a cup of coffee?"

There was a day-old stubble on Slade's face. The cap perched on the back of his graying hair was grimy and sweatstained. Morrison felt unsettled by the sight. Besides, Slade hadn't been any real friend, just a casual acquaintance living a few blocks farther up Hillcrest Road. One of the crowd on those occasional weekend hunting trips of the Hillcrest Maybe Gun and Rod Club. The "Maybe" had been inserted in jest to cover those bad hunting and fishing weekends when it temporarily became a poker club.

"Well," Morrison said, "this happens to be one of those heavy Saturdays when—"

"Look, I'll treat you to the best Danish in town. Believe me, Larry, there's some things I'd like to get off my chest."

"Oh, in that case," said Morrison.

There was a line of driverless cabs in front of a cafeteria on Eighth Avenue. Slade pulled up behind them and led the way into the cafeteria which was obviously a cabbies' hangout. They had a little wrestling match about the check at the counter, a match Slade won, and, carrying the tray with the coffee and Danish, he picked out a corner table for them.

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The coffee was pretty bad, the Danish, as advertised, pretty good. Slade said through a mouthful of it, "And how is Amy?" Amy was Morrison's wife.

"Fine, fine," Morrison said heartily. "And how is Gertrude?"

"Gretchen."

"That's right. Gretchen. Stupid of me. But it's been so long, Bill—"

"It has. Almost three years. Anyhow, last I heard of her Gretchen's doing all right."

"Last you heard of her?"

"We separated a few months ago. She just couldn't hack it any more." Slade shrugged. "My fault mostly. Getting turned down for one worthwhile job after another didn't sweeten the disposition. And jockeying a cab ten, twelve hours a day doesn't add sugar to it. So she and the kid have their own little flat out in Queens, and she got herself some kind of cockamamie receptionist job with a doctor there. Helps eke out what I can give her. How's your pair, by the way? Scott and Morgan, isn't it? Big fellows now, I'll bet."

"Thirteen and ten," Morrison said. "They're fine. Fine."

"Glad to hear it. And the old neighborhood? Any changes?"

"Not really. Well, we did lose a couple of the old-timers. Mike Costanzo and Gordie McKechnie. Remember them?"

"Who could forget Mike, the world's worst poker player? But McKechnie?"

"That split-level, corner of Hillcrest and Maple. He's the one got himself so smashed that time in the duck blind that he went overboard."

"Now I remember. And that fancy shotgun of his, six feet underwater in the mud. Man, that sobered him up fast. What happened to him and Costanzo?"

"Well," Morrison said uncomfortably, "they were both in Regional Customer Services. Then somebody on the top floor got the idea that Regional and National should be tied together, and some people in both offices had to be let go. I think Mike's in Frisco now, he's got a lot of family there. Nobody's heard from Gordie. I mean—" Morrison cut it short in embarrassment.

"I know what you mean. No reason to get red in the face about it, Larry." Slade eyed Morrison steadily over his coffee cup. "Wondering what happened to me?"

"Well, to be frank—"

"Nothing like being frank. I put in two years making the rounds,

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lining up employment agencies, sending out enough résumés to make a ten-foot pile of paper. No dice. Ran out of unemployment insurance, cash, and credit. There it is, short and sweet."

"But why? With the record you piled up at Majestico—"

"Middle level. Not top echelon. Not decision-making stuff. Middle level, now and forever. Just like everybody else on Hillcrest Road. That's why we're on Hillcrest Road. Notice how the ones who make it to the top echelon always wind up on Greenbush Heights? And always after only three or four years? But after you're middle level fifteen years the way I was—"

Up to now Morrison had been content with his twelve years in Sales Analysis. Admittedly no ball of fire, he had put in some rough years after graduation from college—mostly as salesman on commission for some product or other—until he had landed the job at Majestico. Now he felt disoriented by what Slade was saying. And he wondered irritably why Slade had to wear that cap while he was eating. Trying to prove he was just another one of these cabbies here? He wasn't. He was a college man, had owned one of the handsomest small properties on Hillcrest Road, had been a respected member of the Majestico executive team.

Morrison said, "I still don't understand. Are you telling me there's no company around needs highly qualified people outside decision-making level? Ninety percent of what goes on anyplace is our kind of job, Bill. You know that."

"I do. But I'm forty-five years old, Larry. And you want to know what I found out? By corporation standards I died five years ago on my fortieth birthday. Died, and didn't even know it. Believe me, it wasn't easy to realize that at first. It got a lot easier after a couple of years' useless job-hunting."

Morrison was 46 and was liking this less and less. "But the spot you're in is only temporary, Bill. There's still—"

"No, no. Don't do that, Larry. None of that somewhere-over-the-rainbow line. I finally looked my situation square in the eye, I accepted it, I made the adjustment. With luck, what's in the cards for me is maybe some day owning my own cab. I buy lottery tickets, too, because after all somebody's got to win that million, right? And the odds there are just as good as my chances of ever getting behind a desk again at the kind of money Majestico was paying me." Again he was looking steadily at Morrison over his coffee cup. "That was the catch, Larry. That money they were paying me."

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"They pay well, Bill. Say, is that what happened? You didn't think you were getting your price and made a fuss about it? So when the department went under you were one of the—"

"Hell, no," Slade cut in sharply. "You've got it backwards, man. They do pay well. But did it ever strike you that maybe they pay too well?"

"Too well?"

"For the kind of nine-to-five paperwork I was doing? The donkey work?"

"You were an assistant head of department, Bill."

"One of the smarter donkeys, that's all. Look, what I was delivering to the company had to be worth just so much to them. But when every year—every first week in January—there's an automatic cost-of-living increase handed me I am slowly and steadily becoming a luxury item. Consider that after fourteen-fifteen years of those jumps every year, I am making more than some of those young hotshot executives in the International Division. I am a very expensive proposition for Majestico, Larry. And replaceable by somebody fifteen years younger who'll start for a hell of a lot less."

"Now hold it. Just hold it. With the inflation the way it is, you can't really object to those cost-of-living raises."

Slade smiled thinly. "Not while I was getting them, pal. It would have meant a real scramble without them. But suppose I wanted to turn them down just to protect my job? You know that can't be done. Those raises are right there in the computer for every outfit like Majestico. But nobody in management has to like living with it. And what came to me after I was canned was that they were actually doing something about it."

"Ah, look," Morrison said heatedly. "You weren't terminated because you weren't earning your keep. There was a departmental reorganization. You were just a victim of it."

"I was. The way those Incas or Aztecs or whatever used to lay out the living sacrifice and stick the knife into him. Don't keep shaking your head, Larry. I have thought this out long and hard. There's always a reorganization going on in one of the divisions. Stick a couple of departments together, change their names, dump a few personnel who don't fit into the new table of organization.

"But the funny thing, Larry, is that the ones who usually seem to get dumped are the middle-aged, middle-level characters with a lot of seniority. The ones whose take-home pay put them right up

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there in the high-income brackets. Like me. My secretary lost out in that reorganization too, after eighteen years on the job. No complaints about her work. But she ran into what I did when I told them I'd be glad to take a transfer to any other department. No dice. After all, they could hire two fresh young secretaries for what they were now paying her."

"And you think this is company policy?" Morrison demanded.

"I think so. I mean, what the hell are they going to do? Come to me and say, 'Well, Slade, after fifteen years on the job you've priced yourself right out of the market, so goodbye, baby?' But those reorganizations? Beautiful. 'Too bad, Slade, but under the new structure we're going to have to lose some good men.' That's the way it was told to me, Larry. And that's what I believed until I woke up to the facts of life."

The piece of Danish in Morrison's mouth was suddenly dry and tasteless. He managed to get it down with an effort. "Bill, I don't want to say it—I hate to say it—but that whole line sounds paranoid."

"Does it? Then think it over, Larry. You still in Sales Analysis?"

"Yes."

"I figured. Now just close your eyes and make a head count of your department. Then tell me how many guys forty-five or over are in it."

Morrison did some unpalatable calculation. "Well, there's six of us. Including me."

"Out of how many?"

"Twenty-four."

"Uh-huh. Funny how the grass manages to stay so green, isn't it?"

It was funny, come to think of it. No, funny wasn't the word. Morrison said weakly, "Well, a couple of the guys wanted to move out to the Coast, and you know there's departmental transfers in and out—"

"Sure there are. But the real weeding comes when there's one of those little reorganizations. You've seen it yourself in your own department more than once. Juggle around some of those room dividers. Move some desks here and there. Change a few descriptions in the company directory. The smokescreen. But behind that smoke there's some high-priced old faithfuls getting called upstairs to be told that, well, somebody's got to go, Jack,

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now that things are all different, and guess whose turn it is."

Slade's voice had got loud enough to be an embarrassment. Morrison pleaded: "Can't we keep it down, Bill? Anyhow, to make villains out of everybody on the top floor—"

Slade lowered his voice, but the intensity was still there. "Who said they were villains? Hell, in their place I'd be doing the same thing. For that matter, if I was head of personnel for any big outfit, I wouldn't take anybody my age on the payroll either. Not if I wanted to keep my cushy job in personnel, I wouldn't." The wind suddenly seemed to go out of him. "Sorry, Larry. I thought I had everything under control, but when I saw you—when I saw it was one of the old Hillcrest bunch—it was too much to keep corked up. But one thing—"

"Yes?"

"I don't want anybody else back there in on this. Know what I mean?"

"Oh, sure."

"Don't just toss off the oh, sure like that. This is the biggest favor you could do me—not to let anybody else in the old crowd hear about me, not even Amy. No post-mortems up and down Hillcrest for good old Bill Slade. One reason I let myself cut loose right now was because you always were a guy who liked to keep his mouth tight shut. I'm counting on you to do that for me, Larry. I want your solemn word on it."

"You've got it, Bill. You know that."

"I do. And what the hell"—Slade reached across the table and punched Morrison on the upper arm—"any time they call you in to tell you there's a reorganization of Sales Analysis coming, it could turn out you're the guy elected to be department head of the new layout. Right?"

Morrison tried to smile. "No chance of that, Bill."

"Well, always look on the bright side, Larry. As long as there is one."

Outside the Coliseum there was another of those little wrestling matches about paying the tab—Slade refusing to take anything at all for the ride, Morrison wondering, as he eyed the meter, whether sensitivity here called for a standard tip, a huge tip, or none at all—and again Slade won.

Morrison was relieved to get away from him, but, as he soon found, the relief was only temporary. It was a fine Indian summer day, but somehow the weather now seemed bleak and

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threatening. And doing the Majestico show, looking over the displays, passing the time of day with recognizable co-workers turned out to be a strain. It struck him that it hadn't been that atrocious cap on Slade's head that had thrown him, it had been the gray hair showing under the cap. And there was very little gray hair to be seen on those recognizable ones here at the Majestico show.

Morrison took a long time at the full-length mirror in the men's room, trying to get an objective view of himself against the background of the others thronging the place. The view he got was depressing. As far as he could see, in this company he looked every minute of his 46 years.

Back home he stuck to his word and told Amy nothing about his encounter with Slade. Any temptation to was readily suppressed by his feeling that once he told her that much he'd also find himself exposing his morbid reaction to Slade's line of thinking. And that would only lead to her being terribly understanding and sympathetic while, at the same time, she'd be moved to some heavy humor about his being such a born worrier. He was a born worrier, he was the first to acknowledge it, but he always chafed under that combination of sympathy and teasing she offered him when he confided his worries to her. They really made quite a list, renewable each morning on rising. The family's health, the condition of the house, the car, the lawn, the bank balance—the list started there and seemed to extend to infinity.

Yet, as he was also the first to acknowledge, this was largely a quirk of personality—he was, as his father had been, somewhat sobersided and humorless—and, quirks aside, life was a generally all-right proposition. As it should be when a man can lay claim to a pretty and affectionate wife, and a couple of healthy young sons, and a sound home in a well-tended neighborhood. And a good steady job to provide the wherewithal.

At least, up to now.

Morrison took a long time falling asleep that night, and at three in the morning came bolt awake with a sense of foreboding. The more he lay there trying to get back to sleep, the more oppressive grew the foreboding. At four o'clock he padded into his den and sat down at his desk to work out a precise statement of the family's balance sheet.

No surprises there, just confirmation of the foreboding. For a long time now, he and Amy had been living about one month

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ahead of income which, he suspected, was true of most families along Hillcrest Road. The few it wasn't true of were most likely at least a year ahead of income and sweating out the kind of indebtedness he had always carefully avoided.

But considering that his assets consisted of a home with ten years of mortgage payments yet due on it and a car with two years of payments still due, everything depended on income. The family savings account was, of course, a joke. And the other two savings accounts—one in trust for each boy to cover the necessary college educations—had become a joke as college tuition skyrocketed. And, unfortunately, neither boy showed any signs of being scholarship material.

In a nutshell, everything depended on income. This month's income. Going by Slade's experience in the job market—and Slade had been the kind of competent, hardworking nine-to-five man any company should have been glad to take on—this meant that everything depended on the job with Majestico. Everything. Morrison had always felt that landing the job in the first place was the best break of his life. Whatever vague ambitions he had in his youth were dissolved very soon after he finished college and learned that out here in the real world he rated just about average in all departments, and that his self-effacing, dogged application to his daily work was not going to have him climbing any ladders to glory.

Sitting there with those pages of arithmetic scattered around the desk, Morrison, his stomach churning, struggled with the idea that the job with Majestico was suddenly no longer a comfortable, predictable way of life but for someone his age, and with his makeup and qualifications, a dire necessity. At five o'clock, exhausted but more wide-awake than ever, he went down to the kitchen for a bottle of beer. Pills were not for him. He had always refused to take even an aspirin tablet except under extreme duress, but beer did make him sleepy, and a bottle of it on an empty stomach, he estimated, was the prescription called for in this case. It turned out that he was right about it.

In the days and weeks that followed, this became a ritual: the abrupt waking in the darkest hours of the morning, the time at his desk auditing his accounts and coming up with the same dismal results, and the bottle of beer which, more often than not, allowed for another couple of hours of troubled sleep before the alarm clock went off.

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Amy, the soundest of sleepers, took no notice of this, so that was all right. And by exercising a rigid self-control he managed to keep her unaware of those ragged nerves through the daylight hours as well, although it was sometimes unbearably hard not to confide in her. Out of a strange sense of pity, he found himself more sensitive and affectionate to her than ever. High-spirited, a little scatterbrained, leading a full life of her own what with the boys, the Parent-Teachers Club, and half a dozen community activities, she took this as no less than her due.

Along the way, as an added problem, Morrison developed some physical tics which would show up when least expected. A sudden tremor of the hands, a fluttering of one eyelid which he had to learn to quickly cover up. The most grotesque tic of all, however—it really unnerved him the few times he experienced it—was a violent, uncontrollable chattering of the teeth when he had sunk to a certain point of absolute depression. This only struck him when he was at his desk during the sleepless times considering the future. At such times he had a feeling that those teeth were diabolically possessed by a will of their own, chattering away furiously as if he had just been plunged into icy water.

In the office he took refuge in the lowest of low profiles. Here the temptation was to check on what had become of various colleagues who had over the years departed from the company, but this, Morrison knew, might raise the question of why he had, out of a clear sky, brought up the subject. The subject was not a usual part of the day's conversational currency in the department. The trouble was that Greenbush was, of course, a company town, although in the most modern and pleasant way. Majestico had moved there from New York 20 years before; the town had grown around the company complex. And isolated as it was in the green heartland of New Jersey, it had only Majestico to offer. Anyone leaving the company would therefore have to sell his home, like it or not, and relocate far away. Too far, at least, to maintain old ties. It might have been a comfort, Morrison thought, to drop in on someone in his category who had been terminated by Majestico and who could give him a line on what had followed. Someone other than Slade. But there was no one like this in his book.

The one time he came near bringing his desperation to the surface was at the Thanksgiving entertainment given by the

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student body of the school his sons attended. The entertainment was a well-deserved success, and after it, at the buffet in the school gym, Morrison was driven to corner Frank Lassman, assistant principal of the school and master of ceremonies at the entertainment, and to come out with a thought that had been encouragingly flickering through his mind during the last few insomniac sessions.

"Great show," he told Lassman. "Fine school altogether. It showed tonight. It must be gratifying doing your kind of work."

"At times like this it is," Lassman said cheerfully. "But there are times—"

"Even so. You know, I once had ideas about going into teaching."

"Financially," said Lassman, "I suspect you did better by not going into it. It has its rewards, but the big money isn't one of them."

"Well," Morrison said very carefully, "suppose I was prepared to settle for the rewards it did offer? A man my age, say. Would there be any possibilities of getting into the school system?"

"What's your particular line? Your subject?"

"Oh, numbers. Call it arithmetic and math."

Lassman shook his head in mock reproach. "And where were you when we really needed you? Four or five years ago we were sending out search parties for anyone who could get math across to these kids. The last couple of years, what with the falling school population, we're firing, not hiring. It's the same everywhere, not that I ever thought I 'd live to see the day. Empty school buildings all over the country."

"I see," said Morrison.

So the insomnia, tensions, and tics continued to worsen until suddenly one day—as if having hit bottom, there was no place for him to go but up—Morrison realized that he was coming back to normal. He began to sleep through the night, was increasingly at ease during the day, found himself cautiously looking on the bright side. He still had his job and all that went with it, that was the objective fact. He could only marvel that he had been thrown so far off balance by that chance meeting with Slade.

He had been giving himself his own bad time, letting his imagination take over as it had. The one thing he could be proud of was that where someone else might have broken down under the strain, he had battled it out all by himself and had won. He

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was not a man to hand himself trophies, but in this case he felt he had certainly earned one.

A few minutes before five on the first Monday in December, just when he was getting ready to pack it in for the day, Pettengill, departmental head of Sales Analysis, stopped at his desk. Pettengill, a transfer from the Cleveland office a couple of years before, was rated as a comer, slated sooner or later for the top floor. A pleasant-mannered, somewhat humorless man, he and Morrison had always got along well.

"Just had a session with the brass upstairs," he confided. "A round table with Cobb presiding." Cobb was the executive vice president in charge of Planning and Structure for the Greenbush complex. "Looks like our department faces a little reorganization. We tie in with Service Analysis and that'll make it Sales and Service Evaluation. What's the matter? Don't you feel well?"

"No, I'm all right," said Morrison.

"Looks like you could stand some fresh air. Anyhow, probably because you're senior man here, Cobb wants to see you in his office first thing tomorrow morning. Nine sharp. You know how he is about punctuality, Larry. Make sure you're on time."

"Yes," said Morrison.

He didn't sleep at all that night. The next morning, a few minutes before nine, still wearing his overcoat and with dark glasses concealing his reddened and swollen eyes, he took the elevator directly to the top floor. There, out of sight on the landing of the emergency staircase, he drew the barrel and stock of his shotgun from beneath the overcoat and assembled the gun. His pockets bulged with 12-gauge shells. He loaded one into each of the gun's twin barrels. Then concealing the assembled gun beneath the coat as well as he could, he walked across the hall into Cobb's office.

Miss Bernstein, Cobb's private secretary, acted out of sheer blind, unthinking instinct when she caught sight of the gun. She half rose from her desk as if to bar the way to the inner office. She took the first charge square in the chest. Cobb, at his desk, caught the next in the face. Reloading, Morrison exited through the door to the executive suite where Cobb's assistants had been getting ready for the morning's work and were now in a panic at the sound of the shots.

Morrison fired both barrels one after another, hitting one man in the throat and jaw, grazing another. Reloading again, he

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moved like an automaton out into the corridor where a couple of security men, pistols at the ready, were coming from the staircase on the run. Morrison cut down the first one, but the other, firing wildly, managed to plant one bullet in his forehead. Morrison must have been dead, the medical examiner later reported, before he even hit the floor.

The police, faced with five dead and one wounded, put in two months on the case and could come up with absolutely no answers, no explanations at all. The best they could do in their final report was record that "the perpetrator, for reasons unknown, etc., etc."

Management, however, could and did take action. They learned that the Personnel Department psychologist who had put Morrison through the battery of personality-evaluation tests given every applicant for a job was still there with the company. Since he had transparently failed in those tests to sound out the potentially aberrant behavior of the subject, he was, despite sixteen years of otherwise acceptable service, terminated immediately.

Two weeks later, his place in Personnel was filled by a young fellow named McIntyre who, although the starting pay was a bit low, liked the looks of Greenbush and, with his wife in complete agreement, saw it as just the kind of quiet, pleasant community in which to settle down permanently.

"Q"

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Loomis caught the stranger in the act. But what act? Loomis was certain the stranger had stolen something. But what?

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

by BILL PRONZINI

When I drove around the bend in my driveway at four that Friday afternoon, past the screen of cypress trees, a fat little man in a gray suit was just closing the front door of my house. Surprise made me blink: he was a complete stranger.

He saw the car in that same moment, stiffened, and glanced around in a furtive way, as if looking for an avenue of escape. But there wasn't anywhere for him to go; the house is a split-level, built on the edge of a bluff and flanked by limestone outcroppings and thick vegetation. So he just stood there as I braked to a stop in front of the porch, squared his shoulders, and put on a smile that looked artificial even from a distance of 30 feet.

I got out and ran around to where he was. His smile faded, no doubt because my surprise had given way to anger and because I'm a pretty big man, three inches over six feet, weight 230; I played football for four years in college and I move like the linebacker I was. As for him, he wasn't such-a-much—just a fat little man, soft-looking, with round pink cheeks and shrewd eyes that had nervous apprehension in them now.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "What the hell were you doing in my house?"

"Your house? Ah, then you're James Loomis."

"How did you know that?"

"Your name is on your mailbox, Mr. Loomis."

"What were you doing in my house?"

He looked bewildered. "But I *wasn't* in your house."

"Don't give me that. I saw you closing the door."

"No, sir, you're mistaken. I was just coming *away* from the door. I rang the bell and there was no answer—"

"Listen, you," I said, "don't tell me what I saw or didn't see. My eyesight's just fine. Now I want an explanation."

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"There's really nothing to explain," he said. "I represent the Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner Company and I stopped by to ask if you—"

"Let's see some identification."

He rummaged around in a pocket of his suit coat, came out with a small white business card, and handed it to me. It said he was Morris Tweed, a salesman for the Easy-Way Vacuum Cleaner Company.

"I want to see your driver's license," I said.

"My, ah, driver's license?"

"You heard me. Get it out."

He grew even more nervous. "This is very embarrassing, Mr. Loomis," he said. "You see I, ah, lost my wallet this morning. A very unfortunate—"

I caught onto the front of his coat and bunched the material in my fingers; he made a funny little squeaking sound. I marched him over to the door, reached out with my free hand, and tried the knob. Locked. But that didn't mean anything one way or another; the door has a button you can turn on the inside so you don't have to use a key on your way out.

I looked over at the burglar-alarm panel, and of course the red light was off. Tweed, or whatever his name was, wouldn't have been able to walk out quietly through the front door if the system was operational. And except for my housekeeper, whom I've known for years and who is as trustworthy as they come, I was the only one who had an alarm key.

The fat little man struggled weakly to loosen my grip on his coat. "See here, Mr. Loomis," he said in a half-frightened, half-indignant voice, "you have no right to be rough with me. I haven't done anything wrong."

"We'll see about that."

I walked him back to the car, got my keys out of the ignition, returned him to the door, and keyed the alarm to the On position. The red light came on, which meant that the system was still functional. I frowned. If it was functional, how had the fat little man got in? Well, there were probably ways for a clever burglar to bypass an alarm system without damaging it; maybe that was the answer.

I shut it off again, unlocked the door, and took him inside. The house had a faint musty smell, the way houses do after they've been shut up for a time; I had been gone eight days, on a planned

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ten-day business trip to New York, and my housekeeper only comes in once a week. I took him into the living room, sat him down in a chair, and then went over and opened the French doors that led out to the balcony.

On the way back I glanced around the room. Everything was where it should be: the console TV set, the stereo equipment, my small collection of Oriental *objets d'art* on their divider shelves. But my main concern was what was in my study—particularly the confidential records and ledgers locked inside the wall safe.

"All right, you," I said, "take off your coat."

He blinked at me. "My coat? Really, Mr. Loomis, I don't—"

"Take off your coat."

He looked at my face, at the fist I held up in front of his nose, and took off his coat. I went through all the pockets. Sixty-five dollars in a silver money clip, a handkerchief, and a handful of business cards. But that was all; there wasn't anything of mine there, except possibly the money. I shuffled through the business cards. All of them bore the names of different companies and different people, and none of them was a duplicate of the one he had handed me outside.

"Morris Tweed, huh?" I said.

"Those cards were given to me by customers," he said. "*My* cards are in my wallet, all except the one I gave you. And I've already told you that I lost my wallet this morning."

"Sure you did. Empty out your pants pockets."

He sighed, stood up, and transferred three quarters, a dime, a penny, and a keycase to the coffee table. Then he pulled all the pockets inside out. Nothing.

"Turn around," I told him.

When he did that I patted him down the way you see cops do in the movies. Nothing.

"This is all a misunderstanding, Mr. Loomis," he said. "I'm not a thief; I'm a vacuum-cleaner salesman. You've searched me quite thoroughly, you know I don't have anything that belongs to you."

Maybe not—but I had a feeling that said otherwise. There were just too many things about him that didn't add up, and there was the plain fact that I had *seen* him coming *out* of the house. Call it intuition or whatever: I sensed this fat little man had stolen something from me. Not just come here to steal, because he had obviously been leaving when I arrived. He had something of mine, all right.

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But what? And where was it?

I gave him back his coat and watched him put it on. There was a look of impending relief on his face as he scooped up his keys and change; he thought I was going to let him go. Instead I caught hold of his arm. Alarm replaced the relief and he made another of those squeaking noises as I hustled him across the room and down the hall to the smallest of the guest bathrooms, the one with a ventilator in place of a window.

When I pushed him inside he stumbled, caught his balance, and pivoted around to me. "Mr. Loomis, this is outrageous. What do you intend to do with me?"

"That depends. Turn you over to the police, maybe."

"The police? But you can't . . ."

I took the key out of the inside lock, shut the door on him, and locked it from the outside.

Immediately I went downstairs to my study. The Matisse print was in place and the safe door behind it was closed and locked; I worked the combination, swung the door open. And let out the breath I had been holding: the records and ledgers were there, exactly as I had left them. If those items had fallen into the wrong hands, I would be seriously embarrassed at the least and open to blackmail or possible criminal charges at the worst. Not that I was engaged in anything precisely illegal; it was just that some of the people for whom I set up accounting procedures were involved in certain extra-legal activities.

I looked through the other things in the safe—$2000 in cash, some jewelry and private papers—and they were all there, untouched. Nothing, it developed, was missing from my desk either. Or from anywhere else in the study.

Frowning, I searched the rest of the house. In the kitchen I found what might have been jimmy marks on the side door. I also found—surprisingly—electrician's tape on the burglar-alarm wires outside, tape which had not been there before I left on my trip and which might have been used to repair a crosscircuiting of the system.

What I did *not* find was anything missing. Absolutely nothing. Every item of value, every item of no value, was in its proper place.

I began to have doubts. Maybe I was wrong after all; maybe this was just a large misunderstanding. And yet, damn it, the fat little man had been in here and had lied about it, he had no iden-

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tification, he was nervous and furtive, and the burglar alarm and the side door seemed to have been tampered with.

A series of improbable explanations occurred to me. He hadn't actually stolen anything because he hadn't had time; he had broken in here, cased the place, and had been on his way out with the intention of returning later in a car or van. But burglars don't operate that way; they don't make two trips to a house when they can just as easily make one, and they don't walk out the front door in broad daylight without taking *something* with them. Nor for that matter, do they take the time to repair alarm systems they've crosscircuited.

He wasn't a thief but a tramp whose sole reason for breaking in here was to spend a few days at my expense. Only tramps don't wear neat gray suits and they don't have expertise with burglar alarms. And they don't leave your larder full or clean up after themselves.

He wasn't a thief but a private detective, or an edge-of-the-law hireling, or maybe even an assassin; he hadn't come here to steal anything, he had come here to *leave* something—evidence of my extra-legal activities, a bomb or some other sort of death trap. But if there was nothing missing, there was also nothing here that shouldn't be here; I would have found it one way or another if there was, as carefully as I had searched. Besides which, there was already incriminating evidence in my safe, I was very good at my job and got along well with my clients, and I had no personal enemies who could possibly want me dead.

Nothing made sense. The one explanation I kept clinging to didn't make sense. Why would a burglar repair an alarm system before he leaves? How could a thief have stolen something if there wasn't anything missing?

Frustrated and angry, I went back to the guest bathroom and unlocked the door. The fat little man was standing by the sink, drying perspiration from his face with one of my towels. He looked less nervous and apprehensive now; there was a kind of resolve in his expression.

"All right," I said, "come out of there."

He came out, watching me warily with his shrewd eyes. "Are you finally satisfied that I'm not a thief, Mr. Loomis?"

No, I was not satisfied. I considered ordering him to take off his clothes, but that seemed pointless; I had already searched him and there just wasn't anything to look for.

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"What were you doing in here?" I said.

"I was *not* in here before you arrived." The indignation was back in his voice. "Now I suggest you let me go on my way. You have no right or reason to hold me here against my will."

I made another fist and rocked it in front of his nose. "Do I have to cuff you around to get the truth?"

He flinched, but only briefly; he had had plenty of time to shore up his courage. "That wouldn't be wise, Mr. Loomis," he said. "I already have grounds for a counter-complaint against you."

"Counter-complaint?"

"For harassment and very probably for kidnaping. Physical violence would only compound a felony charge. I fully intend to make that counter-complaint if you call the police or if you lay a hand on me."

The anger drained out of me; I felt deflated. Advantage to the fat little man. He had grounds for a counter-complaint, okay—better grounds than I had against him. After all, I *had* forcibly brought him in here and locked him in the bathroom. And a felony charge against me would mean unfavorable publicity, not to mention police attention. In my business I definitely could not afford either of those things.

He had me then, and he knew it. He said stiffly, "May I leave or not, Mr. Loomis?"

There was nothing I could do. I let him go.

He went at a quick pace through the house, moving the way somebody does in familiar surroundings. I followed him out onto the porch and watched him hurry off down the driveway without once looking back. He was almost running by the time he disappeared behind the screen of cypress trees.

I went back inside and poured myself a double bourbon. I had never felt more frustrated in my life. The fat little man had got away with something of mine; irrationally or not, I felt it with even more conviction than before.

But what could he possibly have taken of any value?

And how could he have taken it?

I found out the next morning.

The doorbell rang at 10:45, while I was working on one of my accounts in the study. When I went out there and answered it I discovered a well-dressed elderly couple, both of whom were beaming and neither of whom I had ever seen before.

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"Well," the man said cheerfully, "you must be Mr. Loomis. We're the Parmenters."

"Yes?"

"We just dropped by for another look around," he said. "When we saw your car out front we were hoping it belonged to you. We've been wanting to meet you in person."

I looked at him blankly.

"This is such a delightful place," his wife said. "We can't tell you how happy we are with it."

"Yes, sir," Parmenter agreed, "we knew it was the place for us as soon as your agent showed it to us. And such a reasonable price. Why, we could hardly believe it was only $100,000."

There was a good deal of confusion after that, followed on my part by disbelief, anger, and despair. When I finally got it all sorted out it amounted to this: the Parmenters were supposed to meet here with my "agent" yesterday afternoon, to present him with a $100,000 cashier's check, but couldn't make it at that time; so they had given him the check last night at their current residence, and he in turn had handed them copies of a notarized sales agreement carrying my signatures. The signatures were expert forgeries, of course—but would I be able to *prove* that in a court of law? Would I be able to prove I had not conspired with this bogus real estate agent to defraud the Parmenters of a six-figure sum of money?

Oh, I found out about the fat little man, all right. I found out exactly how clever and audacious he was. And I found out just how wrong I had been—and just how right.

He hadn't stolen anything *from* my house.

He had stolen the whole damned *house*.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Introducing a new detective character . . . "And now let's hear it for the Praw-fessah!" Meet Praw Lawson, the once popular magician on the carnival and night-club circuits of America and Europe—the eminent illusionist who, by force of circumstances, became a tracer of lost persons. Not since the grand and glorious days of Clayton Rawson's The Great Merlini (Rawson-Lawson—odd coincidence) have we published a magician-manhunter with as much promise for a new series character as the "Praw-fessah!" . . .

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING PENELOPE

by ***WILLIAM BANKIER***

Al Batross was always trying to ingratiate himself with his employer, Praw Lawson. He did this now by trudging through the rain to the fruit barrow by the Covent Garden Underground station and purchasing two pounds of seedless grapes which were out of season and exorbitantly priced. He carried the fruit back to the tiny office two floors above The Falling Arches pub on Longacre Street and placed the soggy paper bag on Lawson's desk.

Lawson was sitting with his feet up, holding a deck of cards, practising making them disappear one at a time. The old reflexes were not what they once were; the floor around his chair was littered with bent cards. "Something for me, Al?" Lawson said, barely concealing his irritation.

"A little present, Praw. Enjoy."

Lawson's wife, Lola, sat at the window using whatever gray light she could catch on the surface of her newspaper to read

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about potential business for the firm. Missing Persons cases were potential business. So far today she had found only stories about murder, robbery, kidnapping, and terrorism. Plenty there for the police but not much for her and the Praw and her brother Al.

"You might sound a little grateful, Praw," she said to her husband. "Al got wet getting you those grapes."

"I wish he wouldn't bother," Lawson said. "Your brother makes me feel like the Ancient Mariner—all day long I've got Al Batross hanging around my neck."

It was a familiar joke and the others ignored it. Praw Lawson was not nearly as put out as he was letting on and neither was Lola. They were a loving couple in their late forties, childless and therefore left with room in their hearts for young Al. In any case, Lola Batross never went anywhere without her only brother and when she became Lola Lawson, this arrangement was understood.

For years the magic act of Professor Harry Lawson had been popular on the carnival and night-club circuits of America and Europe. It was popular not because the illusions Lawson specialized in were very special. They were, in fact, hackneyed and more often than not they didn't work. The appeal was Lola, the magician's assistant, who appeared with him in black tights and opaque body stockings that enhanced her voluptuous figure.

The simple truth was that Lola Batross-Lawson, face and shape, was probably one of the three or four most beautiful women who had ever lived. She had to rate right up there along with Nefertiti, Salome, Juliet Capulet, and Ann Sheridan. Audiences filled any theater or tent where the act was performed for the breathless pleasure of looking at Lola as she was crated and stabbed or sawed in half or, best of all, immersed in a glass case full of water.

It was at some time during this career that Harry Lawson adopted his nickname. A carnival announcer on the southern circuit introduced him with the words, "And now let's hear it for the Praw-fessah!" He became Praw Lawson from that day on.

But as the world turned, Lola Lawson's metabolism worked away at breaking down the cream buns she loved to eat, converting and storing them as fatty tissue. Lola became large and one day decided as she stood before her full-length mirror that she was not going to put on that silly costume and make a fool of herself any more. Not that most men would have complained. She still dressed smartly and her progress these days down a London

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street caused sober, respectable husbands to turn and watch her passage, cursing inaudibly while exchanging wounded glances with other understanding males.

Without his assistant Praw Lawson was just another aging magician, reduced to touring Britain in a second-rate carny show. Even this career wobbled to a stop when the operator went bankrupt and absconded with the week's receipts, leaving his acts unpaid in Paisley. And this, unexpectedly, was a turning point in Lawson's life.

The rest of the destitute performers registered complaints with the police and then waited for the next nasty blow that fate might be preparing. But not the Praw. He set out on a seek-and-destroy mission that led through towns and pubs and hostels and railway stations the length and breadth of the British Isles and eventually he confronted the dishonest promoter in a dance hall in south London. When the scoundrel pleaded insolvency, Lawson fell upon him and tore the clothes from his body, all except his underwear, and then proceeded to rend each garment to shreds, dazzling himself and the spectators by producing £800 in cash and two small diamonds sewed into the jacket lining. It was one of the Professor's greatest performances.

Back in Paisley, Lawson used the cash and the jewels to bail out his wife and brother-in-law as well as several carnival mates who had settled there abandoned like stones dropped into the sea. And Praw Lawson's new reputation was established. He was a man who could find somebody who had chosen to disappear.

Exit Professor Harry Lawson, the eminent illusionist. Enter Praw Lawson, tracer of lost persons.

This new career, hardly recognized as such by Lawson and Company, received a boost when the carnival strongman, an Irish youth named Achilles Healey, hired Lawson to find his vanished wife. Healey wanted two things done—his wife found, and then himself prevented from laying his hands on her.

This search began and ended successfully in London and Lawson decided to rent an office there and pursue the new trade full time. He soon discovered that finding missing persons was a matter of persistence, common sense, imagination, and luck. Lawson was very lucky indeed when he managed to find the amnesiac father of a tabloid journalist. The delighted newspaperman gave Lawson the sort of publicity he could never have paid for, and thereafter one commission followed another.

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Until recently. "Well, kiddies, this is an important day," Lawson said, bending to pick up the fumbled cards and striking his head on the edge of the desk as he rose. He stared wide-eyed at Lola and Al, admiring the pulsating spots of light swarming before his eyes like lightning bugs. "This day marks our third consecutive week without a client. We have minus eleven quid in the bank, and all that stands between us and starvation is a pound of wet grapes."

"As usual, you exaggerate our difficulties," Lola said.

"Yeah," Al agreed. "There's two pounds of grapes there."

Lawson threaded both hands into his thatch of red and gray hair. His scalp waited, tingling, daring him. He knew that once he began scratching he would have to go on until his head looked like a fright wig. What the hell—he dug in and scrubbed mercilessly. Then he said, "All I want to know is where are all the missing people?"

He listened to what he had just said, and laughed. He knew what he meant.

"Maybe it's alienation," Al said sincerely. He was an olive-skinned boy of 28 with innocent brown eyes under lashes like Lola's. "People don't care any more if their loved ones disappear. They just let them go."

The room was silent except for the persistent flitting of raindrops on the windowpane. After a California-like summer the autumn weather was working hard at being English. Then Lola said, "Maybe my kid brother just said something. Maybe we should think about going home."

Her thoughts kept returning these days to East Norwalk and her happy Connecticut childhood. She remembered a raft on Long Island Sound with an outboard motor driving herself and her father, the two of them seated on kitchen chairs at a folding table under a huge umbrella, drinking lemonade and eating gingersnaps as they put-putted majestically past tethered yachts.

Lawson ignored the suggestion. Home to him meant hungry streets in Detroit and the way he now heard it, they would not even be his streets any more. Besides, there was no money for going home. "Why does it have to be a vanished loved one?" he said. "Can't somebody ask us to locate somebody they hate?"

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairway below. The occupants of the tiny office held their breath waiting to hear if the visitor would stop climbing and enter the photocopy shop on the floor be-

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low. No, the steps paused, then continued on the final steep flight. The Lawson enterprise might just be in business again!

The man who knocked once and entered the office seemed to be two men. His body was clad in a conservative blue business suit with white shirt and neatly knotted tie in red and blue diagonal stripes. But his face, though cleanly shaven, was crowned with a mass of shiny chestnut hair, shoulder-length and drawn back in a ponytail by a twisted elastic band. He was carrying a wet umbrella.

"Mr. Lawson?"

"Yes. Do have a seat. Here, let me take your brolly. Don't worry about the drip. Help yourself to some grapes." Weeks of pent-up courtesy and customer good will threatened to overwhelm the young man; he looked to be in his late twenties.

"I'm Jeremy Hattersley," he said. "I've heard you're the best man in London when it comes to finding a missing person."

"Let's say one of the best." Lawson remained standing, a lightly clenched fist poised beneath his chin. His posture was theatrical, balanced to glide in any direction. "Whom can I find for you?"

"A woman. You won't find her, I'm afraid she's dead. But in not finding her, you may help me convince the people who suspect she's still alive. Her name, I understand, is Penelope Coleston."

Lawson stood fast in the face of these puzzling statements. "You understand?"

"Yes. You see, I don't really know her." Hattersley was staring at Lola who had crossed her sturdy legs. Al offered the grapes and the young man shook his head, saying, "I'd better begin at the beginning."

"A useful idea," Lawson said.

"I'm a freelance journalist. Nothing very prestigious but I make a living writing journeyman articles on subjects I know editors are interested in. And a month ago I was in Cornwall researching a piece on a chap who believes ancient Celtic law gives him the right to mine for tin anywhere he likes, regardless of who owns the property."

Lawson frowned. "He may be all right if he can argue his case in an ancient Celtic court."

The young man used both hands to adjust his ponytail and went on to say, "When I finished my research, I boarded a train at Penzance and headed back to London. I was in a first-class compartment with one other person—the woman they tell me is, or was,

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Penelope Coleston. I paid very little attention to her, spending the time going over the notes I had taken earlier that day. All I remember about her is that she seemed distraught and kept talking to herself. And that she gave me £20 just before she left the train."

Lawson nodded, watching the young man as he spoke. "I see. And at which station did she leave the train?"

"At no station. She opened the door and stepped out while the train was in motion."

Lola Lawson gasped at this. "You mean she committed suicide?"

"Exactly."

"Then why is she considered a missing person? Why have you come to me?" Lawson felt a surge of disappointment which he expressed by snatching the bag of grapes away from Al Batross who was popping them into his mouth one at a time like somebody stringing beads.

"Because the bank she worked for does not believe any of this. Apparently she embezzled a lot of money and when they were about to pick her up she took off. I was the last person to see her."

Praw Lawson walked behind his desk and sat down. He picked up a pen and drew a notepad into position. "This is getting interesting," he said. "But it sounds to me as if the bank has the problem, not you. You just happened to be around when the lady left the train."

"That's right. But this Arthur Gill individual at the bank is trying to implicate me in the affair. He suggests I know more than I'm telling." Hattersley shrugged. "Anyway, you'd better get that from him."

"Arthur Gill," Lawson said as he wrote the name down. "Which bank is that?"

"The Southern United—the branch on Lower Regent Street."

"I'll call on him." Lawson set down the pen. "But I still don't understand. If the bank has doubts about your story, surely the onus is on them to find the lady and prove their case." The former magician raised his eyebrows significantly. "After all, my fee—"

Hattersley took an envelope from his inner pocket. "I've brought £200. I hope that will be enough to start on. I told Gill that once you've done your stuff, then I'm going to come down on the bank for every penny of this, and more."

"Done my stuff? But you believe the woman is dead."

"Right. The train was crossing the Tamar River when she

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stepped out. I believe the body went into the water and out to sea. But *they* think she's alive somewhere. Fine. If Professor Lawson can't find her, they'll have to get off my back. I've told that to Arthur Gill and I'd like you to repeat it to him."

Lawson went alone to the Southern United Bank, traveling by cab through gray, glistening streets. It was a comfort to hand a five-pound note to the driver. For a man with a balance of minus eleven, the influx of £200 was a great restorer of confidence.

Arthur Gill was a little porcelain person with agate eyes. Every visible hair on his body could have been counted individually in less than a minute. He sat rigidly behind his desk pushing pens and paper clips and mail trays like stops on an organ—the Phantom of the Bank.

"Yes," he said, "everything Hattersley told you is correct. And there may be no more to the story than that. Certainly the police seem ready to close the file and mark it suicide."

"They must have their reasons."

"The note, mainly. And Miss Coleston's observed behavior over the last few weeks."

"I'd like to hear about that."

"The note," Gill said, "was found in her handbag which she left on the seat of the train compartment. I don't remember the exact wording but it stated she was tired of living in a world so full of inequities. Anyway, it was in her bag along with some £8000 in cash."

Lawson blinked. "And you think she's still alive?" He sat in the austere office shaking his head. "In my experience, no woman in her right mind would go away and abandon her handbag. With or without eight thousand pounds in it."

"True enough," Arthur Gill said. "The police claim the same thing. And there was her behavior earlier that day. She was seen on the streets of Penzance, of all places, flinging money to the passers-by. She also tried to hand it to people in pubs. As far as we can total, she gave away another two thousand."

"Out of how much? What was the original sum taken from the bank?"

The mineral eyes in the polished head glinted intensely. "Seventy-five thousand," he said. "Which means we have sixty-five thousand still unaccounted for."

It was an important fact and Lawson considered it. "She might

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have hidden it somewhere, or even tossed it into a fire."

"I doubt that last," Gill said. "Her whole confusion over those final weeks had to do with people who have so little while others have so much. She used to go in and berate the manager of this branch about it. Had some plan for us to share the wealth with needy families. Then one night she took her bundle and didn't come to work the following day. Next thing we heard she was dispensing it down there in Cornwall. And that evening, so we are told, she stepped out of a moving train while Mr. Hattersley looked on in surprise and horror."

"Can't say I blame him for that," Lawson said, feeling he ought to express some loyalty to his client. "And the body was never found?"

"No. One shoe and a cardigan sweater which have been identified as Miss Coleston's were found on the trestles of the railway bridge. The matching shoe was found floating in the river by a boat crew searching for the body. Admittedly, the Tamar is a deep river and it flows to the Channel. A body conceivably might not be found for months."

"But you believe," Lawson said, "that the body may be walking around on the surface of the earth, having decided only to disappear."

"Especially," Arthur Gill said dryly, "when it has sixty-five thousand tax-free pounds to live on."

Professor Harold Lawson went back to the Covent Garden office and recounted the new information to Lola and Al. He ended up by asking his wife what she thought.

"If Hattersley is mixed up in something," she said, "I don't see why he'd come to you and pay you all that money. He must be innocent."

"Unless that's what he wants Arthur Gill to think. Besides, the money itself makes me suspicious. Freelance journalists don't usually have £200 of disposable income to pay a detective."

"But the handbag and all that money left in the train," brother Al said. "That could only happen when a woman is out of her mind and about to kill herself."

"You'd certainly think so. But still—"

Lola said, "You're puzzled, aren't you, Praw, by the way she stepped out of that moving train and disappeared."

The former master of illusion wrinkled his brow. "That's right," he said. "It just couldn't happen."

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The Fallen Arches opened for business on Longacre Street at 5:30. The entire staff of Lawson Enterprises went down to the cosy pub soon after opening and sat on an upholstered bench near the gas fire drinking best bitter and enjoying the sound of rain on the leaded windowpanes. After a long silence, it was Praw who said, "If it couldn't happen, it didn't."

"Beg your pardon?"

But Lawson's mind was racing on. "Make a mental note, love," he said. "Tomorrow. I go to see that harness maker over on Drury Lane."

"What?"

"And then I pay a little visit to my old friend Achilles Healey."

Lola Lawson had not heard the name of the carnival strongman in a year and she could not imagine what her husband was up to on such unlikely errands. Still, she knew better than to question him when he had that inventive gleam in his eye.

It was a week later when Lawson left orders for Lola and Al to meet him at Victoria Station opposite the platform from which the 10:30 express would depart for Brighton. Feeling more confused than ever, Al shifted his feet and looked from the tickets in his hand to the usually reassuring face of his big sister. "Why are we going to Brighton?" he asked.

"Trust the Praw," Lola said. "He knows what he's doing." This had been her credo during years of being guillotined nightly before packed houses.

At 10:15 Mr. Arthur Gill showed up and introduced himself. He was equally baffled by Lawson's instructions to be here. Five minutes later a very nervous-looking Jeremy Hattersley arrived clutching a briefcase to his chest. Finding Gill there did nothing to ease his troubled mind.

The train pulled in, the gates were opened, and a few passengers went aboard. Departure time had almost arrived when Praw Lawson approached on the double, all three buttons fastened on his jacket, his broad face gleaming with perspiration. Lola was struck suddenly by the weight her husband had put on and she felt a twinge of concern for his health.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Fine, fine! Are we all here? Sorry to roust you out, Mr. Hattersley, but I've solved the mystery of the missing Penelope Coleston and I knew you'd want to hear the truth." He gave the jour-

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nalist a playful poke on the arm as he led the way to a first-class compartment and opened the carriage door. Allowing the others to step inside, Lawson lingered a moment on the platform looking back toward the gate. Then he nodded and stepped up and aboard, slamming the door behind him.

On this out-of-season occasion the Brighton train was not crowded. They had the compartment to themselves. In fact, the entire train seemed half empty. As they got under way, Al Batross repeated his earlier question. "Why are we going to Brighton in November?"

"The destination is irrelevant," Lawson said. "I just thought that since we're investigating the disappearance of a lady from a train, it would make sense to recreate the situation, so to speak." He turned to beam again at Jeremy Hattersley. "Let me take your briefcase," he said. "Plenty of room on the rack."

"I'll hold onto it," the journalist said. "I may do some work in a minute."

"Very good," Lawson said. "And as soon as we've made our stop at Clapham Junction, I'll get on with *my* work." With this remark he sat back, folded his arms, and closed his eyes. The train rattled past a sea of roofs and chimneys, soon entered Clapham, stopped for a few passengers, then got underway again on the hour-long journey to the channel coast.

Now Praw Lawson opened his eyes, stared alertly at his client, and said, "It occurred to me last week. If one is confronted by a situation in which the impossible seems to have happened, don't try to explain it. Instead, assume that it did *not* happen. And go on from there."

"What I've suspected all along," said Arthur Gill, rocking with the motion of the train like a large figurine on the padded seat.

"Now you say, Mr. Hattersley, that Miss Coleston opened the door of the train and stepped into the night. You pulled the emergency cord, a search was conducted, and no body was ever found."

"Her shoes were. And her sweater."

"Easy enough to throw those things out before you pulled the cord. Now. Assuming she never jumped, and you insist you saw her do it, then there can be only one other explanation. You are Penelope Coleston's accomplice."

"I never met the woman before."

"And here is my theory. Penelope Coleston's plan was to appear

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mad. Thus her visit to the bank manager pleading for handouts to the poor. Thus her giving away a portion of the stolen funds, her suicide note, her willingness to abandon £8000 in her bag. All this was arranged with your connivance. I suggest you boarded the train in Penzance alone, bearing the sweater and shoes in your briefcase as well as the handbag with the money. Miss Coleston was never on the train, nor did she ever perform the impossible—leaving a train at speed without any trace of her body afterwards. I would defy even a trained illusionist to perform such a trick."

At these words Lola Lawson looked sharply at her husband and kept staring at him while Mr. Gill said, "This is the sort of theory I'd endorse, Lawson. But where is Penelope Coleston? Where is the rest of the money?"

"They are together, somewhere in London," Lawson said. "Mr. Hattersley will tell us precisely where after he admits his complicity in this affair."

"Admit nothing!" Hattersley exploded. "All you've done is formulate a theory. Where's the proof?"

Praw Lawson reached into the pocket of his jacket and drew out an audiotape cassette. "It's here," he said. "A tape of a recent telephone conversation between you and Miss Coleston made after she disappeared. I know it's illegal to tap a phone, but sometimes we stretch a law to catch a thief."

There was a snapping of catches as Hattersley unfastened his briefcase and suddenly the pistol was in his hand and aimed at the occupants of the compartment as the journalist edged to the door leading to the coach corridor. "Stay where you are, all of you," he commanded. "The next time this train stops, I'm getting off."

"In that case," the magician said, "I might as well leave right now." And with those final words Praw Lawson stood up, opened the outer door of the compartment, unbuttoned his jacket, and stepped out of the speeding train.

Lola screamed. Al bellowed. Arthur Gill cried out, "Good Lord!" And Jeremy Hattersley stared at the open door with the roadbed and the countryside panorama flashing past it.

It took a few seconds for Lola to come to her senses and shout, "The emergency stop! Pull the handle, somebody!"

But then Praw Lawson's voice said, "Not necessary, love." And there he was in the corridor doorway behind Hattersley, pinning

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his arms, seizing the gun, pushing the startled journalist onto a seat.

"How did you do that?" Arthur Gill said.

Only slightly out of breath, Lawson said, "Catch that door and shut it, Al. That's better. Now, you just relax, Mr. Hattersley. We'll be in Brighton in half an hour. A quick visit to the police, a tidy confession, directions to where Miss Coleston is hiding with the money, and then it's all over."

"But you stepped out of the train," Lola said, not sure whether to laugh or cry. "Yet here you are. How in the world—?"

"I don't usually explain my illusions," Lawson said, "but in this case I will." He drew back his unbuttoned jacket and revealed a chest harness with a large metal ring stitched onto the front of it. "This is what I had the harness shop make for me. Very sturdy job—it had to be since my life depended on it."

"I still don't see—"

"You will." Lawson raised his voice. "All right, lads, you can come in now."

Two massively built young men entered from the corridor, crowding the compartment. Lawson introduced them as Achilles Healey and friend. "Once they saw us get aboard, Achilles and his mate entered the next compartment behind. As soon as we passed Clapham Junction, they unfastened the hinge bolts and took off their outer door. This left Achilles free to stand in the doorway and lean out while his friend braced himself and held onto Achilles' belt. I stepped out, jacket open and facing the back of the train, and Achilles simply snatched the ring on the chest harness as I flew past and whipped me into their compartment." He smiled at the black-haired giant. "Is the door back on?"

"Like new, Praw."

Lawson beamed at his audience. "So there you are," he said. And then, in a carnival tone, "Let's hear it for the Praw-fessah!"

For a few seconds the clatter of the wheels was drowned by the sound of applause in the closed compartment.

"And now," the illusionist said, "as soon as we get to Brighton and take care of our legal business, I suggest that Mr. Gill treats us all to a seafood dinner."

"My pleasure, I assure you."

Lola was looking worried. "But the tape," she said. "If it's illegal to tap phones as you say, won't you get in trouble?"

"Oh, that." Lawson took the cassette from his jacket. "That's

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just a blank cassette. I bought it on the way to the train." With a quick movement he tossed it through the opening at the top of the window.

Al Batross showed distress. "Gee, Praw, a blank cassette. I could have used that."

Lawson grinned at his brother-in-law, reached across, and extracted the cassette from behind the lapel of Al's jacket. He dropped it in the boy's lap. Then as he sat down he said, "Achilles, me lad, why don't you position yourself next to the outer door and keep an eye on Mr. Hattersley. From the look on his face I get the feeling he may try to duplicate my trick."

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a *NEW* Ehrengraf story by

LAWRENCE BLOCK

Martin H. Ehrengraf, the dapper little "corrector of destinies," is a dandy all right, in more senses than one. And you don't quite know which path he'll take when confronted by a client with a curious problem—the crooked path or the straight path, the road of a "criminal" lawyer or the road of a "detectival" lawyer. But of one thing you can be certain—the Ehrengraf fee will be a large one . . .

THE EHRENGRAF RIPOSTE

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

Martin Ehrengraf placed his hands on the top of his exceedingly cluttered desk and looked across its top. He was seated, while the man at whom he gazed was standing, and indeed looked incapable of remaining still, let alone seating himself on a chair. He was a large man, tall and quite stout, balding, florid of face, with a hawk's-bill nose and a jutting chin. His hair, combed straight back, was a rich and glossy dark brown; his bushy eyebrows were salted with gray. His suit, while of a particular shade of blue that Ehrengraf would never have chosen for himself, was well tailored and expensive. It was logical to assume that the man within the suit was abundantly supplied with money, an assumption the little lawyer liked to be able to make about all his prospective clients.

Now he said, "Won't you take a seat, Mr. Crowe? You'll be more comfortable."

"I'd rather stand," Abel Crowe said. "I'm too much on edge to sit still."

"Hmmm. There's something I've learned in my practice, Mr. Crowe, and that's the great advantage in acting *as if*. When I'm to defend a client who gives every indication of guilt, I act *as if* he

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were indeed innocent. And you know, Mr. Crowe, it's astonishing how often the client does in fact *prove* to be innocent, often to his own surprise."

Martin Ehrengraf flashed a smile that showed on his lips without altering the expression in his eyes. "All of which is all-important to me, since I collect a fee only if my client is judged to be innocent. Otherwise I go unpaid. Acting *as if*, Mr. Crowe, is uncannily helpful, and you might help us both by sitting in that chair and acting as if you were at peace with the world."

Ehrengraf paused, and when Crowe had seated himself he said, "You say you've been charged with murder. But homicide is not usually a bailable offense, so how does it happen that you are here in my office instead of locked in a cell?"

"I haven't been charged with murder."

"But you said—"

"I said I wanted you to defend me against a homicide charge. But I haven't been charged yet."

"I see. Whom have you killed? No, let me amend that. Whom are you supposed to have killed?"

"No one."

"Oh?"

Abel Crowe thrust his head forward. "I'll be charged with the murder of Terence Reginald Mayhew," he said, pronouncing the name with a full measure of loathing. "But I haven't been charged yet because the rancid scut's not dead yet because I haven't killed him yet."

"Mr. Mayhew is alive."

"Yes."

"But you intend to kill him."

Crowe chose his words carefully. "I expect to be charged with his murder," he said at length.

"And you want to arrange your defense in advance."

"Yes."

"You show commendable foresight," Ehrengraf said, admiringly. He got to his feet and stepped out from behind his desk. He was a muted symphony of brown. His jacket was a brown Harris tweed in a herringbone weave, his slacks were cocoa flannel, his shirt a buttery tan silk, his tie a perfect match for the slacks with a below-the-knot design of fleur-de-lis in silver thread. Ehrengraf hadn't been quite certain about the tie when he bought it but had since decided it was quite all right. On his small feet he wore

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highly polished seamless tan loafers, unadorned with braids or tassels.

"Foresight," he repeated. "An unusual quality in a client, Mr. Crowe, and I can only wish that I met with it more frequently." He put the tips of his fingers together and narrowed his eyes. "Just what is it you wish from me?"

"Your efforts in my behalf, of course."

"Indeed. Why do you want to kill Mr. Mayhew?"

"Because he's driving me crazy."

"How?"

"He's playing tricks on me."

"Tricks? What sort of tricks?"

"Childish tricks," Abel Crowe said, and averted his eyes. "He makes phone calls. He orders things. Last week he called different florists and sent out hundreds of orders of flowers to different women all over the city. He's managed to get hold of my credit card numbers and placed all these orders in my name and billed them to me. I was able to stop some of the orders, but by the time I got wind of what he'd done most of them had already gone out."

"Surely you won't have to pay."

"It may be easier to pay than to go through the process of avoiding payment. I don't know. But that's just one example. Another time ambulances and limousines kept coming to my house. One after the other. And taxicabs, and I don't know what else. These vehicles kept arriving from various sources and I kept having to send them away."

"I see."

"And he fills out coupons and orders things C.O.D. for me. I have to cancel the orders and return the products. He's had me join book clubs and record clubs, he's subscribed me to every sort of magazine, he's put me on every sort of mailing list. Did you know, for example, that there's an outfit called the International Society for the Preservation of Wild Mustangs and Burros?"

"It so happens I'm a member."

"Well, I'm sure it's a worthwhile organization," Crowe said, "but the point is I'm not interested in wild mustangs and burros, or even tame ones, but Mayhew made me a member and pledged a hundred dollars on my behalf, or maybe it was a thousand dollars, I can't remember—"

"The exact amount isn't important at the moment, Mr. Crowe."

"He's driving me crazy!"

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"So it would seem. But to kill a man because of some practical jokes—"

"There's no end to them. He started doing this almost two years ago. At first it was completely maddening because I had no idea what was happening or who was doing this to me. From time to time he'll slack off and I'll think he's had his fun and has decided to leave me alone. Then he'll start up again."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I can't. He laughs like the lunatic he is and hangs up on me."

"Have you confronted him?"

"I can't. He lives in an apartment downtown on Chippewa Street. He doesn't let visitors in and never seems to leave the place."

"And you've tried the police?"

"They can't seem to do anything. He just lies to them, denies all responsibility, tells them it must be someone else. A very nice policeman told me the only sensible thing I can do is wait him out. He'll get tired, he assured me, the man's madness will run its course. He'll decide he's had his revenge."

"And you tried to do that?"

"For a while. When it didn't work I engaged a private detective. He obtained evidence of Mayhew's activities, evidence that will stand up in court. But my attorney convinced me not to press charges."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"The man's a cripple."

"Your attorney?"

"Certainly not. Mayhew's a cripple, he's confined to a wheelchair. I suppose that's why he never leaves his squalid little apartment. But my attorney said I could only charge him with malicious mischief, which is not the most serious crime in the book and which sounds rather less serious than it is because it has the connotation of a child's impish prank—"

"Yes."

"—and there we'd be in court, myself a large man in good physical condition and Mayhew a sniveling cripple in a wheelchair, and he'd get everyone's sympathy and undoubtedly be exonerated of all charges while I'd come off as a bully and a laughingstock. I couldn't make charges stand up in criminal court, and if I sued him I'd probably lose, and even if I won that what could I get? The man doesn't have anything to start with."

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Ehrengraf nodded thoughtfully. "He blames you for crippling him?"

"I don't know. I had never even heard of him before he started tormenting me, but who knows what a madman might think? He doesn't seem to want anything from me. I've called him up, asked him what he wanted, and he only laughs and hangs up on me."

"And so you've decided to kill him."

"I haven't said that."

Ehrengraf sighed. "We're not in court, Mr. Crowe, so that sort of technicality's not important between us. You've implied you intend to kill him."

"Perhaps."

"At any rate, that's the inference I've drawn. I can certainly understand your feelings, but isn't the remedy you propose an extreme one? The cure seems worse than the disease. To expose yourself to a murder trial—"

"But your clients rarely go to trial."

"Oh?"

Crowe hazarded a smile. It looked out of place on his large red face, and after a moment it withdrew. "I'm familiar with your methods, Mr. Ehrengraf," he said. "Your clients rarely go to trial. You hardly ever show up in a courtroom. You take a case and then something curious happens. The evidence changes, or new evidence is discovered, or someone else confesses, or the murder turns out to be an accident after all, or—well, *something* always happens."

"Truth will out," Ehrengraf said.

"Truth or fiction, something happens. Now here I am, plagued by a maniac, and I've engaged you to undertake my defense whenever it should become necessary, and it seems to me that by so doing I may bring things to the point where it *won't* become necessary."

Ehrengraf looked at him. A man who would select a suit of that particular shade, he thought, was either color blind or capable of anything.

"Of course I don't know what might happen," Abel Crowe went on. "Just as hypothesis, Terence Reginald Mayhew might die. Of course if that happened I wouldn't have any reason to murder him, and so I wouldn't come to trial. But that's just an example. It's certainly not my business to tell you your business, is it?"

"Certainly not," said Martin Ehrengraf.

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While Terence Reginald Mayhew's four-room apartment on Chippewa Street was scarcely luxurious, it was by no means the squalid pesthole Ehrengraf had been led to expect. The block, to be sure, was not far removed from slum status. The building itself had certainly seen better days. But the Mayhew apartment itself, occupying the fourth-floor front and looking northward over a group of two-story frame houses, was cozy and comfortable.

The little lawyer followed Mayhew's wheelchair down a short hallway and into a book-lined study. A log of wax and compressed sawdust burned in the fireplace. A clock ticked on the mantel. Mayhew turned his wheelchair around, eyed his visitor from head to toe, and made a brisk clucking sound with his tongue. "So you're his lawyer," he said. "Not the poor boob who called me a couple of months ago, though. That one kept coming up with threats and I couldn't help laughing at him. He must have turned purple. When you laugh in a man's face after he's made legal threats he generally turns purple. That's been my experience. What's your name again?"

"Ehrengraf. Martin H. Ehrengraf."

"What's the H. stand for?"

"Harrod."

"Like the king in the Bible?"

"Like the London department store." Ehrengraf's middle name was not Harrod, or Herod either, for that matter. He simply found untruths useful now and then, particularly in response to impertinence.

"Martin Harrod Ehrengraf," said Terence Reginald Mayhew. "Well, you're quite the dandy, aren't you? Sorry the place isn't spiffier but the cleaning woman only comes in once a week and she's not due until the day after tomorrow. Not that she's any great shakes with a dustcloth. Lazy slattern, in my opinion. You want to sit down?"

"No."

"Probably scared to crease your pants."

Ehrengraf was wearing a navy suit, a pale blue velvet vest, a blue shirt, a navy knit tie, and a pair of cordovan loafers. Mayhew was wearing a disgraceful terrycloth robe and tatty bedroom slippers. He had a scrawny body, a volleyball-shaped head, big guileless blue eyes, and red straw for hair. He was not so much ugly as bizarre; he looked like a cartoonist's invention. Ehrengraf couldn't guess how old he was—thirty? forty? fifty?—

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but it didn't matter. The man was years from dying of old age.

"Well, aren't you going to threaten me?"

"No," Ehrengraf said.

"No threats? No hints of bodily harm? No pending lawsuits? No criminal prosecution?"

"Nothing of the sort."

"Well, you're an improvement on your predecessor," Mayhew said. "That's something. Why'd you come here, then? Not to see how the rich folks live. You slumming?"

"No."

"Because it may be a rundown neighborhood but it's a good apartment. They'd get me out if they could. Rent control—I've been here for ages and my rent's a pittance. Never find anything like this for what I can afford to pay. I get checks every month, you see. Disability. Small trust fund. Doesn't add up to much, but I get by. Have the cleaning woman in once a week, pay the rent, eat decent food. Watch the TV, read my books and magazines, play my chess games by mail. Neighborhood's gone down but I don't *live* in the neighborhood. I live in the apartment. All I get of the neighborhood is seeing it from my window, and if it's not fancy that's all right with me. I'm a cripple, I'm confined to these four rooms, so I don't care what the neighborhood's like. If I was blind I wouldn't care what color the walls were painted, would I? The more they take away from you, why, the less vulnerable you are."

That last was an interesting thought and Ehrengraf might have pursued it, but he had other things to pursue. "My client," he said. "Abel Crowe."

"That warthog."

"You dislike him?"

"Stupid question, Mr. Lawyer. Of course I dislike him. I wouldn't keep putting the wind up him if I thought the world of him, would I now?"

"You blame him for—"

"For me being a cripple? He didn't do that to me. God did." The volleyball-head bounced against the back of the wheelchair, the wide slash of mouth opened. A cackle of laughter spilled out. "God did it! I was born this way, you chowderhead. Abel Crowe had nothing to do with it."

"Then—"

"I just hate the man," Mayhew said. "Who needs a reason? I

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saw a preacher on Sunday morning television; he stared right into the camera every minute with those great big eyes, said no one has cause to hate his fellow man. At first it made me want to retch, but I thought about it, and I'll be an anthropoid ape if he's not right. No one has cause to hate his fellow man because no one *needs* cause to hate his fellow man. It's natural, and it comes natural for me to hate Abel Crowe."

"Have you ever met him?"

"I don't have to meet him."

"You just—"

"I just hate him," Mayhew said, grinning fiercely, "and I *love* hating him, and I have heaps of *fun* hating him, and all I have to do is pick up that phone and make him pay and pay and pay for it."

"Pay for what?"

"For everything. For being Abel Crowe. For the outstanding war debt. For the loaves and the fishes." The head bounced back and the insane laugh was repeated. "For Tippecanoe and Tyler too. For Tippecanee and Tyler Three." And the laugh, loud and resonant.

"You don't have very much money," Ehrengraf said. "A disability pension, a small income."

"I have enough. I don't eat much and I don't eat fancy. You probably spend more on clothes than I spend on everything put together."

Ehrengraf didn't doubt that for a moment. "My client might supplement that income of yours," he said thoughtfully.

"You think I'm a blackmailer?"

"I think you might profit by circumstances, Mr. Mayhew."

"Fie on it, sir. I'd have no truck with blackmail. The Mayhews have been whitemailers for generations."

The conversation continued, but not for long. It became quite clear to the diminutive attorney that his was a limited arsenal. He could neither threaten nor bribe to any purpose. Any number of things might happen to Mayhew, some of them fatal, but such action seemed wildly disproportionate. This housebound wretch, this malevolent cripple, had simply not done enough to warrant such a response. When a child thumbed his nose at you, you were not supposed to dash its brains out against the curb. An action ought to bring about a suitable reaction. A thrust should be countered by an appropriate riposte.

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But how was one to deal with a nasty madman? A helpless pathetic madman?

Ehrengraf, who was fond of poetry, sought his memory for an illuminating phrase. Thoughts of madmen recalled Christopher Smart, an eighteenth-century Londoner who was periodically confined to Bedlam where he wrote a long poem that was largely comprehensible only to himself and God.

Quoting Smart, Ehrengraf said, " 'Let Ross, house of Ross, rejoice with Obadiah, and the rankle-dankle fish with hands.' "

Terence Reginald Mayhew nodded. "Now that," he said, "is the first sensible thing you've said since you walked in here."

A dozen days later, while Martin Ehrengraf was enjoying a sonnet of Thomas Hood's, his telephone rang. He took it up, said hello, and heard himself called an unconscionable swine.

"Ah," he said. "Mr. Mayhew."

"You are a man with no heart. I'm a poor housebound cripple, Mr. Ehrengraf—"

"Indeed."

"—and you've taken my life away. Do you have any idea what I went through to make this phone call?"

"I have a fair idea."

"Do you have any idea what I've been going through?"

"A fair idea of that as well," Ehrengraf said. "Here's a pretty coincidence. Just as you called I was reading this poem of Thomas Hood's—do you know him?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"A sonnet called *Silence*. I'll just read you the sestet.

But in green ruins, in the desolate walls
Of antique palaces, where Man hath been,
Though the dun fox or wild hyena calls,
And owls, that flit continually between,
Shriek to the echo, and the low winds moan—
There the true silence is, self-conscious and alone.

Don't you think that's marvelously evocative of what you've been going through, Mr. Mayhew?"

"You're a terrible man."

"Indeed. And you should never forget it."

"I won't."

"It could all happen again. In fact, it could happen over and over."

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"What do I have to do?"

"You have to leave my client strictly alone."

"I was having so much fun."

"Don't whine, Mr. Mayhew. You can't play your nasty little tricks on Mr. Crowe. But there's a whole world of other victims out there just waiting for your attentions."

"You mean—"

"I'm sure I've said nothing that wouldn't have occurred to you in good time, sir. On the other hand, you never know what some other victim might do. He might even find his way to my office, and you know full well what the consequences of that would be. Indeed, you know that you *can't* know. So perhaps what you ought to do is grow up, Mr. Mayhew, and wrap the tattered scraps of your life around your wretched body, and make the best of it."

"I don't—"

"Think of Thomas Hood, sir. Think of the true silence."

"I can't—"

"Think of Ross, house of Ross, and the rankle-dankle fish with hands."

"I'm not—"

"And think of Mr. Crowe, while you're at it. I suggest you call him, sir. Apologize to him. Assure him that his troubles are over."

"I don't want to call him."

"Make the call," Ehrengraf said, his voice smooth as steel. "Or your troubles, Mr. Mayhew, are just beginning."

"The most remarkable thing," Abel Crowe said. "I had a call from that troll Mayhew. At first I didn't believe it was he. I didn't recognize his voice. He sounded so frightened, so unsure of himself."

"Indeed."

"He assured me I'd have no further trouble from him. No more limousines or taxis, no more flowers, none of his idiotic little pranks. He apologized profusely for all the trouble he'd caused me in the past and assured me it would never happen again. It's hard to know whether to take the word of a madman, but I think he meant what he said."

"I'm certain he did."

They were once again in Martin Ehrengraf's office, and as usual the lawyer's desk was as cluttered as his person was immaculate. He was wearing the navy suit again, as it happened, but he had

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left the light blue vest at home. His tie bore a half-inch diagonal stripe of royal blue flanked by two narrower stripes, one of gold and the other of a rather bright green, all on a navy field. Crowe was wearing a three-piece suit, expensive and beautifully tailored but in a rather morose shade of brown. Ehrengraf had decided charitably to regard the man as color blind and let it go at that.

"What did you do, Ehrengraf?"

The little lawyer looked off into the middle distance. "I suppose I can tell you," he said after a moment's reflection. "I took his life away from him."

"That's what I thought you would do. Take his life, I mean. But he was certainly alive when I spoke to him."

"You misunderstand me. Mr. Crowe, your antagonist was a housebound cripple who had adjusted to his mean little life of isolation. He had an income sufficient to his meager needs. And I went around his house shutting things down."

"I don't understand."

"I speak metaphorically, of course. Well, there's no reason I can't tell you what I did in plain English. First of all, I went to the post office. I filled out a change-of-address card, signed it in his name, and filed it. From that moment on all his mail was efficiently forwarded to the General Delivery window in Greeley, Colorado, where it's to be held until called for, which may take rather a long time."

"Good heavens."

"I notified the electric company that Mr. Mayhew had vacated the premises and ordered them to cut off service forthwith. I told the telephone company the same thing, so when he picked up the phone to complain about the lights being out I'm afraid he had a hard time getting a dial tone. I sent a notarized letter to the landlord—over Mr. Mayhew's signature, of course—announcing that he was moving and demanding that his lease be canceled. I got in touch with his cleaning woman and informed her that her services would no longer be required. I could go on, Mr. Crowe, but I believe you get the idea. I took his life away and shut it down and he didn't like it."

"Good grief."

"His only remaining contact with the world was what he saw through his windows, and that was nothing attractive. Nevertheless I was going to have his windows painted black from the outside—I was in the process of making final arrangements. A

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chap was going to suspend a scaffold as if to wash the windows but he would have painted them instead. I saw it as a neat coup de grâce, but Mayhew made that last touch unnecessary by throwing in the sponge. That's a mixed metaphor, from coup de grâce to throwing in the sponge, but I hope you'll pardon it."

"You did to him what he'd done to me. Hoist him on his own petard."

"Let's say I hoisted him on a similar petard. He plagued you by introducing an infinity of unwanted elements into your life. But I reduced his life to the four rooms he lived in and even threatened his ability to retain those very rooms, and that drove the lesson home to him in a way I doubt he'll ever forget."

"Simple and brilliant," Crowe said. "I wish I'd thought of it."

"I'm glad you didn't."

"Why?"

"Because you'd have saved yourself fifty thousand dollars."

Crowe gaped. "Fifty thousand—"

"Dollars. My fee."

"But that's an outrage. All you did was write some letters and make some phone calls."

"All I did, sir, was everything you asked me to do. I saved you from answering to a murder charge."

"I wouldn't have murdered him."

"Nonsense," Ehrengraf snapped. "You *tried* to murder him. You thought engaging me would have precisely that effect. Had I wrung the wretch's neck you'd pay my fee without a whimper, but because I accomplished the desired result with style and grace instead of brute force you resist paying me. It would be an immense act of folly, Mr. Crowe, if you were to do anything other than pay my fee in full at once."

"You don't think the amount is out of line?"

"I don't keep my fees in a line, Mr. Crowe." Ehrengraf's hand went to the knot of his tie. It was the official tie of the Caedmon Society of Oxford University. Ehrengraf had not attended Oxford and did not belong to the Caedmon Society, any more than he belonged to the International Society for the Preservation of Wild Mustangs and Burros, but it was a tie he habitually wore on celebratory occasions. "I set my fees according to an intuitive process," he went on, "and they are never negotiable. Fifty thousand dollars, sir. Not a penny more, not a penny less. Ah, Mr. Crowe, Mr. Crowe. Do you know why Mayhew chose to torment you?"

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"I suppose he feels I've harmed him."

"And have you?"

"No, but—"

"Supposition is blunder's handmaiden, Mr. Crowe. Mayhew made your life miserable because he hated you. I don't know why he hated you. I don't believe Mayhew himself knows why he hated you. I think he selected you at random. He needed someone to hate and you were convenient. Ah, Mr. Crowe." Ehrengraf smiled with his lips. "Mr. Crowe, consider how much damage was done to you by an insane cripple with no reason to do you harm. And then consider, sir, how much more harm could be done you by someone infinitely more ruthless and resourceful than Terence Reginald Mayhew, someone who is neither a lunatic nor a cripple, someone who is supplied with fifty thousand excellent reasons to wish you ill."

Crowe stared. "That's a threat," he said slowly.

"I fear you've confused a threat and a caution, Mr. Crowe, though I warrant the distinction's a thin one. Are you fond of poetry, sir?"

"No."

"I'm not surprised. It's no criticism, sir. Some people have poetry in their souls and others do not. It's predetermined, I suspect, like color blindness. I could recommend Thomas Hood, sir, or Christopher Smart, but would you read them? Or profit by them? Fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Crowe, and a check will do nicely."

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Certainly not."

"And I won't be intimidated."

"Indeed you won't," Ehrengraf agreed. "But do you recall our initial interview, Mr. Crowe? I submit that you would do well to act *as if*—as if you were afraid of me, as if you were intimidated."

Abel Crowe sat quite still for several seconds. A variety of expressions played over his generally unexpressive face. At length he drew a checkbook from the breast pocket of his morosely brown jacket and uncapped a silver fountain pen.

"Payable to—"

"Martin H. Ehrengraf."

The pen scratched away. Then, idly, "What's the H. stand for?"

"Herod."

"The store in England?"

"The king," said Ehrengraf. "The king in the Bible."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 508th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Selkirk was ambitious and full of fire, eager, impatient to challenge the leader of the herd—like a young bull . . .

The author, James P. Williams, was thirty-three when he submitted his first story. A "New Yorker" for most of his life, he has traveled extensively in the United States and abroad. In his spare time he enjoys participating in sports and "of course, reading"—including "books of mystery and suspense" . . .

YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY

by JAMES P. WILLIAMS

Selkirk was a young man in a hurry. Though out of law school only three years and already senior man on the DA's staff, he was impatient to climb to the next rung on the ladder he hoped would take him all the way to the governor's mansion and—who knows?—possibly beyond. He was tired of handling routine cases day after day, tired of being little more than an anonymous gear in the great machine of American justice, tired of languishing in the District Attorney's shadow.

Of course, it was flattering to have been put in charge of the office while the DA was away at the state capital; and only last evening, over steaks at the country club, John Cannon had suggested that Selkirk consider running for public office. But when the DA came back next Monday, Selkirk would return to being just another of the five prosecutors on the staff; and John Cannon had talked of running not for District Attorney but for the state legislature.

Cannon's support meant money—lots of it—for a media saturation campaign and it meant the automatic backing of the party organization; but Selkirk had no intention of getting lost in a crowd of 160 legislators (in his mind the political equivalent of

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hara-kiri) even to please the richest and most influential man in Dobler County.

Still, for the next few days he would have a small taste of the job he'd been eyeing for the past two years, and at least he could find reassurance in the knowledge that John Cannon was taking a serious interest in him. It was in the hope of just such an eventuality that Selkirk had passed up a prestigious job in the state capital and had chosen, instead, to join the DA's staff.

Dobler County, with a relatively small population and with the highest per-capita income of any county in the state, was ideal for Selkirk's purposes. The political power base was in the hands of a few men like John Cannon, and it was far easier for a young ambitious man to make the right contacts here than it would have been in a large city. Besides, the District Attorney was an old man, and was ready to be taken.

Oh, the DA was capable enough, Selkirk agreed. He knew the law and he was an able administrator, but he was as out of place in a modern political organization as a bison was on a prairie ribboned with superhighways. His rumpled country-lawyer image did not fit in with what Selkirk liked to call "the dynamics of modern public power," and like the bison that had once populated this region, the DA was doomed to extinction.

Personally, Selkirk liked the District Attorney, but after all, 25 years ought to be enough for any man. If the D.A. was content to stagnate in Dobler County, if he had neither the ambition to move up nor the grace to step down, he would have to be shoved out of the way.

Selkirk paused on the steps of the old brick courthouse and sniffed the morning sunshine. The smell of spring was in the air, the season of change, of the new replacing the old. In the distance he could see the steel and glass skeleton of the new office complex that would soon house the various agencies of local government, including the office of the District Attorney. And again he thought of the bison that had once grazed on this land. He could see them as they once were—the great herds coming each spring, crowding the vast expanse of the prairie past the horizon; the young bull, full of fire and burgeoning strength, ready to challenge the old leader, prepared to lock horns in ferocious battle until one or the other emerged the victor—and the ruler. The bison were gone now, but things hadn't changed that much.

He was ready to do battle, ready to challenge the District At-

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torney; but John Cannon had advised caution, reminding Selkirk that the DA had run unopposed in his last three elections. Wait, he had counseled. Be patient. The DA was 60, and in all probability would retire after his next term. Meanwhile, a couple of terms in the state legislature would give Selkirk the seasoning he needed to run for District Attorney four years from now.

Four years!

He might as well have said 40 years. No. The time was right. Selkirk possessed the one attribute the present DA lacked, the one thing that Dobler County, like the rest of America, seemed to respect above all else—youth! The old man could be taken now, and Selkirk was certain he was the man to do it.

But John Cannon was right about one thing. Selkirk's name was not exactly a household word in the county. He needed a way to catch the eye of the public, to make them think that his running for District Attorney was their idea, not his. An inborn politician's instinct warned him that going to the state legislature would all but bury any chance he had of becoming District Attorney. And being District Attorney was the quickest way Selkirk knew to the governor's mansion.

He took a final breath of the clean morning air and went into the courthouse. The greetings he received as he walked to the DA's private office seemed a bit warmer than usual, a bit friendlier. His new status as Acting District Attorney was already bringing its first fringe benefit. People want to identify with a winner, and the staff had begun to treat him with a cautious respect, sidling up to him the way the nubile cows must have sidled up to a strong young bull about to challenge the leader of the herd.

He had just hung his coat on the old-fashioned wood tree that stood in the corner of the office and settled in behind the old man's ancient mahogany desk when Pauline came in with the day's agenda. Her greeting was especially warm. Selkirk knew that she liked him and that she took a special pride in his newfound prestige. He also suspected that as the District Attorney's private secretary she may have helped his being named Acting DA. She was a pretty girl, with a slim graceful figure, dark eyes that hinted at a trace of Indian ancestry, and a warm smile that stirred something inside Selkirk. As she leaned over the desk, briefing him on the day's work schedule, he wondered if he should ask her for a drink after work.

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Then he remembered Moira Cannon.

Moira would be coming home from college in three weeks, and John Cannon had invited him to the graduation party he was giving her at the ranch. Pauline was pretty, but the opportunity to get close to John Cannon's daughter was too good to pass up. Perhaps, he thought, he'd better forget about Pauline for the present and see first how things went between Moira and him.

Pauline turned to leave and stopped abruptly. "Oh, I almost forgot. There's a man outside, a Mr. Jamison. He wouldn't tell me what he wanted, but he said it was important and it wouldn't take long."

"Okay, let him wait another fifteen minutes, then tell him I can give him five minutes."

Jamison was a hawk-nosed man about Selkirk's age, well dressed in a blue pin-stripe suit, and armed with a big smile that he flashed as they shook hands. He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, took out a leather folder, and showed an identity card with his picture on it. "Secret Service. I understand the District Attorney's out of town."

"That's right, but I'm handling things," Selkirk said, waving Jamison into a chair. "What can I do for you?"

"Six months ago a quarter of a million dollars in unissued Treasury bonds were stolen in a holdup in New York. We believe one hundred thousand dollars of those bonds are about to surface here in Dobler County."

"Here? A little out of our league, I'd say. Where exactly?"

"At the Mercantile Bank of Dobler County."

John Cannon's bank. That was news. "But aren't the serial numbers recorded? Surely a computer check would show that they're stolen. It's standard operating procedure these days, even out here in the boondocks. Anyone trying to sell stolen bonds would be spotted in minutes."

"Yes, that's true, but we don't think the bonds are for sale. We believe they are now in the possession of a man named Edward Norris. He's a Los Angeles businessman who acts as agent for a number of, shall we say, shady corporations. Last week Norris applied for a one-hundred-thousand-dollar loan from the Mercantile Bank and promised to deliver a like amount of Treasury bonds for the bank to hold as security. Though banks invariably check out the bonds they buy, they rarely give more than a cursory glance at the bonds left as security for a loan. Because T

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bonds are considered as good as cash, Norris can borrow at very low interest rates and invest for quick profits. It provides a tidy income without running the risk of trying to sell the bonds."

"I see. Of course we'll cooperate in any way possible, but I'm wondering why you came to me about this."

"It's department policy to coordinate activities with local law-enforcement agencies whenever possible, and since I'll need the cooperation of the bank officials I thought it better if I were introduced by a local man."

"Why not the Sheriff?"

Jamison smiled rather sheepishly and looked directly at Selkirk for a moment. "I'm going to level with you. I've been working on this case for six months, and I don't want some country cop stepping in at the last minute and taking all the credit." He paused for a moment. "I hope we understand each other."

Selkirk understood all right. It was exactly what he would have done in Jamison's place. This Federal man was obviously another young bull, ready to lock horns with his superiors, and Selkirk wondered if there wasn't some way he could turn the situation to his own advantage.

"Tell me, Jamison, what will the charges be when you catch this Norris?"

"Transporting stolen goods across state lines and conspiracy to commit. But he's small potatoes. We're after the people he's working for."

"There wouldn't be any local charges, nothing that would come under my jurisdiction?"

"Not unless the transaction at the bank actually took place. That would be fraud, of course. But that's all academic. As soon as he shows up at the bank, I'm going to nail him. All I'd like from you is an introduction to the chief officer at the bank. A Mr. Warner, isn't it?"

"No, John Cannon is the president. Warner's only the manager. Tell me, when do you expect Norris will arrive?"

"Today or tomorrow."

"And how many of you are working on this? I mean, here in town."

"Just me. No one else knows that Norris is coming here."

"I see . . ." Selkirk picked up a pencil and tapped it lightly on the desk. He stopped abruptly. "Look, the way I see it, you want me to cooperate under the table so that you can conform to your

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department's policy and still keep this a one-man operation."

"Off the record, that's about it."

"How would you feel about a two-man operation?"

"What exactly are you driving at, Selkirk?"

"Suppose, instead of arresting Norris as soon as he walks into the bank, we let the loan go through. You'd still have your charges and still get all the credit from Washington."

"And you'd cash in on all the local publicity. Young prosecutor makes outstanding arrest in DA's absence. It would make good copy, at that."

"What do you say?"

"I take it, if I say no, you'll go directly to the Sheriff."

Selkirk smiled.

"All right," Jamison said, "but let's get the ground rules straight. The Federal charges have to take priority. I'll take the prisoner into custody, transport him back to the capital along with the evidence, and charge him. You add your charges later. That way I get credit for a solo arrest."

"I'm not so sure about—"

"And while I'm busy doing the paperwork, you can be spending your time hamming it up with the local newsboys. You can give out the story any way you want, but officially I have to be the arresting officer. Later you can always say you let the Federal charges take precedence and still make it look as if you did all the work. The public will eat it up, and I'll still get my brownie points."

"All right, Jamison, we've got a deal. This Norris, you're sure he'll be here? Before Monday? The District Attorney will be back on Monday. If it doesn't go through before then—"

"He'll be here by tomorrow at the latest. He's all set at the bank. All he has to do is drop off the T bonds and pick up his hundred thousand."

As soon as Jamison left, Selkirk called John Cannon. "I think I've found a way to put myself in front of the public the way you suggested, and to keep your bank from being swindled out of a hundred thousand dollars at the same time."

He explained about Jamison and the man named Norris, and when he had finished John Cannon said, "If this comes off, I think I can promise you'll be our candidate for DA come November."

At two o'clock Jamison called. "Norris is in town. I think it's going down this afternoon."

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"What time?"

"Don't worry. You'll make the five o'clock newscast. And this way you'll get a repeat in the morning papers. Two days of publicity for the price of one. You'd better come over here."

Fifteen minutes later Selkirk joined Jamison and Cannon in the bank president's private office.

"As soon as it's right," Jamison explained, "Mr. Warner will buzz this office on the intercom. That's our signal. I've got a car out back, so we won't have to make a scene in the bank."

"You don't think there's going to be any trouble, do you?" Cannon asked. "I don't want anyone in the bank getting hurt."

"Not a chance," Jamison said. "Norris does his stealing with a briefcase, not a gun. He'll let his lawyers do his fighting for him."

They settled back to wait. Cannon fidgeted restlessly in his plush leather chair, looking as though he'd be more comfortable in a saddle than behind an executive's desk, and Jamison sat with his hands folded in his lap and stared at the carpet. Selkirk closed his eyes, mentally preparing a press release. He wondered if it was necessary to mention Jamison at all and concluded it wasn't.

In a way, Selkirk thought, it was a shame this Norris character wouldn't try to resist arrest. A touch of violence always added drama to a story. He weighed the possibilities of slipping in a veiled suggestion that, somehow, the DA had been remiss in his duty by being away at this time, but decided against it. Better not go too far. Let the public draw its own conclusions.

The intercom buzzed and Jamison was on his feet and on the way to Warner's office ahead of Selkirk. It was all over by the time Selkirk caught up. An elderly man with a bushy white mustache stood handcuffed in front of the bank manager's desk, and Jamison was reciting his constitutional rights to him. When he was done with the arrest ritual, Jamison swept aside the stacks of bills piled on the desk, opened a brown attaché case, and extracted a Treasury bond.

"This is it, all right. We've got him dead to rights."

Pauline was seated at her typewriter when Selkirk arrived back at the office. "I want you to call Joe Kane at the *Clarion* and the news department at KBNC and tell them we have a major news story. I'll meet with them here in one hour. Call the *Gazette* too."

"What's happened?"

"You'll hear all about it when they get here." He started for the

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private office, but turned back. "How about a drink after work? I feel like celebrating."

"Fine. I'd love to," Pauline answered, and smiled at him before picking up the telephone.

He looked at her for another moment, while she dialed the *Clarion*. She was pretty enough, and nice, but he could not picture her as a governor's wife. Moira Cannon seemed more suited to that role.

A mile outside of town Jamison's car sped eastward on 142. A brown attaché case on the back seat contained the Treasury bonds and $100,000 in cash taken into custody as evidence along with the handcuffed Mr. Norris.

"Slow down, willya!" the man in the passenger seat said. "You want to get stopped by some eager-beaver State Trooper? And give me the handcuff key. You put 'em on too tight again." The driver produced a key and handed it over. "And what's the idea of making that Assistant DA sign the bank receipt for the money?"

"Make him? He practically begged me to let him do it. He's one of these Ivy League hot shots. Thinks he's about to cut the DA's throat. I didn't even have to bring up about letting the loan go through instead of nabbing you right off. It was his own idea." The man who called himself Jamison laughed. "I can't wait until he tries to explain how come his name's on a receipt for a hundred grand that he handed over to us—"

"Don't be so harsh on him. The hot blood of youth has led many a good man astray, m'boy. In time he'll learn to be more temperate, not to be in such an all fired hurry." The man called Norris put the handcuffs and the key into his pocket and rubbed his wrists briskly. "Next time I'm going to play the Fed. See how you like those handcuffs cutting off your circulation."

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

BRIAN GARFIELD's "Charlie in the Tundra"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 509th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the kind of adventure that might have happened to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn . . .

The author, Mrs. Donna Henseler, is "a wife and the mother of three sons." The Henselers "live on 96 acres of forested hills by a large lake nine miles from Yankton, South Dakota." For neighbors they have deer, wild turkeys, and coyotes; they raise soft-coated Wheaten terriers, "tolerate" three cats, garden organically, photograph wild life, and loaf ("a dying art").

Now, we remember that less than two years ago we received another "first story" from Yankton, South Dakota—from Patricia Schulze. Yankton can't be that large a place. Is it possible the two women know each other? We inquired, and sure enough it was Patricia Schulze who urged Donna Henseler to submit her story. Not only that (and truth is stranger than fiction): the Schulze family now owns the same house that the Henseler family lived in for many years! Mrs. Henseler "wrote a doctoral dissertation and lots of poetry in that house," and she adds that the house "must have good vibrations!" It's a small, small world . . .

THE BRIGHT MEDAL

by DONNA HENSELER

And so, Uncle Enoch, I'm writing to you 'cause you're about all the family I have left in the world. I know you're busy with your loan office and your property and all. But you were kind enough to get old Mrs. Niesinger to take me in after Pa and Ma died. And I do appreciate your leaving me to work for my board and room, too, 'cause I don't know where else I could have managed that except right here in Twin Rivers. Most folks don't want

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to be bothered with a fifteen-year-old boy, leastways not you, so busy collecting money and such.

Anyways, I got to tell somebody, and I figured you'd be interested seeing's how you're in the money business. I don't rightly know what to do with this here stuff I have. But I'm pretty sure you'll have some ideas.

First, let me tell you how I got it.

About two months ago a preacher fella come driving into Twin Rivers in an old Pierce Arrow coupe. Told folks he was a missionary—been all over the world converting them heathens, you know. He was kind of quiet at first. Rented a room at Mrs. Niesinger's boardinghouse and kept pretty much to himself. He was real nice to Mrs. Niesinger, though. And before long she was having him down to her apartment regular for tea in the afternoon while they read the Bible together and prayed and all. So people kind of got used to seeing him driving around town and quit talking about the "new parson."

You see, he didn't make any trouble for the other preachers in Twin Rivers. Didn't want to start a church or preach. Word went around he'd been sick and was recuperating here. He didn't go to church on Sunday, but folks just shook their heads and said they hoped the poor man would get back on his feet soon.

Well, one afternoon not too long after the preacher come to town, I was doing some yard work for Mrs. Niesinger. Boy, it was hot that day, and I got so dry I couldn't have raised enough spit to whistle. So I went in through the back porch to get a drink in the kitchen. As I stepped inside I heard voices in the living room, and when I peeked through the crack in the door I saw Mrs. Niesinger was entertaining the preacher to some iced tea and cookies.

She had her Bible spread out on her lap, and he was sitting close talking in her ear. About then Mrs. Niesinger giggled and jiggled her fat and says, "Oh, Parson Peabody, you don't say!" Then she put her handkerchief over her face to cover the red and went on laughing.

That Parson Peabody, he laughed too and pulled his chair a little closer to Old Lady Niesinger. Beats me what she saw so funny in him. He was a skinny old bird with kind of dirty-looking gray hair and a pasty face. Only he had really bright eyes like two black aggies that sort of bored a hole in a person when he looked at you.

"Now," says the preacher, "before we end our little chat for

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today with our usual prayer, I want to do something very nice for you, dear Letitia. I'm going to let you meditate with me according to a practice I learned while working with the natives of Fangodango." Imagine, he called her by her first name!

Then out of his vest pocket he pulled a funny-looking medal on a chain. It was real bright—gold maybe—and from what I could tell had pictures on both sides. The preacher held it up in front of Mrs. Niesinger and swung it back and forth gently, all the time telling her to think on the medal.

At first Mrs. Niesinger just kept giggling and squealing, "Oh, Parson, it just makes me faint to watch that thing, oh, I can't concentrate in this heat, oh, my stars, my head's whirling." And stuff like that. Kind of silly talk, I thought, for a woman in her fifties, especially a hefty one like she is.

But it wasn't long before she began to calm down, and pretty soon she wasn't saying a word, just watching that medal go back and forth, back and forth.

To tell the truth, I was watching and feeling kind of weak-kneed myself. I heard a buzzing in my head, and all I could see was this bright thing swaying in front of me.

Just when I felt myself about to lift up and float away, I felt something bite my bare leg a good one and jumped like I'd been shot. Wouldn't you know one of them pesky horseflies we get here in August had followed me into the kitchen and lit on me as I was watching the medal!

I slapped my leg and scratched like crazy to relieve the sting. Then I remembered what I'd been watching, so I quick looked back into the other room. By this time the preacher had put the medal back in his vest pocket. Mrs. Niesinger was sitting like a statue, her hands folded in her lap on her Bible, her head tilted back, mouth hanging open and eyes staring at nothing. The preacher reached over and gave her fat arm a little pinch, but she didn't move. Then he lifted one of her eyelids and squinted into her eye. She was out like a light.

"Now then, my dear Letitia," he says real soft to her, "you want to help the poor suffering people of China, I know you do. They need your prayers, sweet lady. But they need your money more. If you'll just tell me where you keep your cash—"

In a groggy voice Mrs. Niesinger says to him, "Keep—money—in safe—in closet."

"Ah, yes, that's fine, my dear," the preacher says. "Now, let's

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just go over the combination to that safe." And would you believe it, Old Lady Niesinger spewed out the combination!

"Very good! Excellent!" he says, but he didn't make a move toward the safe. "Now, sweet lady, the poor starving heathens are in need of anything else you may have of value. Are there bonds in the safe? Any jewelry?"

I could hardly believe my ears as that old woman right out went through all her valuables and told him exactly where to find them. 'Cause he did. He just up and went to the safe, humming a little tune, flipped the combination like he'd done it a million times, opened the door, and cleaned that safe out slicker'n grease on a doorknob. All the time Mrs. Niesinger sat there with that sappy look on her face, her chins sagging onto the lace collar of her going-to-church dress.

After the preacher had neatly packed away the stuff from the safe into the satchel he always carried, he came back and sat down by Mrs. Niesinger again. "There'll be stars in your crown, dear lady, yes, indeed, there'll be many stars in your crown. Now, it's time to waken. But before you do, you will remember nothing of this conversation, nothing." His black eyes snapped as he leaned toward her. "You will remember only that we prayed and that you meditated on the suffering of the heathens. You will *not* look in your safe for a long time, a long, long time. And even when you look, you will not remember what was there. Now"—the preacher passed his hand in front of her eyes—"when I say the magic word you will waken refreshed and happy." And he said it.

Mrs. Niesinger slowly began to stretch. Then she yawned a great big one right in the preacher's face. "My stars, I do declare I feel like I've been asleep, Parson! Is that what it's like to meditate?"

He smiled real oily at her. "My dear Letitia, you are amazing! You meditated completely, beautifully—and to think—your very first time! What a joy it is to the Lord to see His loved ones in such deep communication with Him. Shall we pray?"

And they did. But not before Mrs. Niesinger had said she could hardly wait to tell the ladies in her circle at church. And her sister, Mildred, of course. Parson Peabody said, yes, he'd be glad to have a prayer meeting and meditation with any of her friends and no, indeed, there'd be no charge, no charge at all because this was all part of his work and was free.

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I snuck out of the kitchen, forgetting to get my drink, and was glad to get away without anyone seeing me. Even though I was still thirsty and it was hotter than blazes in the back yard, I scurried around picking up twigs and pretended I hadn't been near the house. When Mrs. Niesinger and the preacher came strolling out to finish their tea in the gazebo, I acted like I had about half my wits, and they paid me no mind at all. I figured I was safe.

Well, Uncle Enoch, that was only the beginning. I made it my business to follow the preacher to all of his prayer meetings. I was always careful not to look at the medal when he finally pulled it out. I watched him take in enough money to feed all of India and half of China in about two weeks' time!

But I kept my mouth shut—mainly because nobody remembered what had happened to them. They would have run me out of town on a rail if I'd told them the preacher was relieving them of their life savings.

Finally Parson Peabody heard about Alfred Freimeier. In fact, it was one of the other preachers told him. By this time Peabody had pulled his medal act with all the preachers and had them under his thumb. So I knew that when he heard about Alfred he'd be out there in two shakes of a lamb's tail.

I don't know if you remember Alfred, Uncle Enoch, but he's the richest man around here, an ornery old cuss who never got married. He set out to own Marne County, lock, stock, and barrel, and he had almost all of it by the time Parson Peabody got to him.

Now, Alfred was so old that he spent most of his days either in bed or in a wheel chair. He'd hired a man to wait on him, paid him beggar's wages, and treated him like dirt. 'Course, times being what they are, the man stuck to the job. It was either that or starve.

Anyways, Alfred still lived just outside of town in the big ramshackle house he'd built when he was younger. There's them says he built it for a mail-order bride who changed her mind at the last minute and didn't come. Well, Alfred lived there with his man in this big house with no furniture in it except for a bed, of course, and stove and the few things you need to live in a house.

It was late afternoon when Parson Peabody got to Alfred's place. The dogs like to eat him up before the hired man come out and called them off. When the man saw the preacher standing there all shriveled up with fear of the dogs, he apologized and said sure, he'd get old man Freimeier up to talk to the parson.

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The preacher loosened up then and patted the man on the back and called him "my good man" and a "fine Christian soul" and walked into the house with him.

I crept up to a window and looked into the bare room where the preacher was sitting on a chair the hired man had brought for him. I wasn't scared of the dogs. Heck, I know every dog in Marne County, and I knew these dogs just wanted a handout. So I gave them each a bone I'd brought for them, and they all went back to the barn, and that's the last I heard from them.

Pretty soon the man come into the room with Alfred. I could tell he was in a bad way, shaking and slobbering around, his eyes all dull and filmy. He sat down in the wheel chair and bent his head while the preacher said a long loud prayer for the Lord to bless this old gentleman who was one of His children. Alfred cried and slobbered some more down the front of his shirt, and I felt embarrassed as all get out.

Then the preacher told the hired man he could take the rest of the day off, that he would take care of Alfred and get him tucked back in bed after he'd fixed him supper. 'Course, the hired man didn't mind that at all, and the last I saw of him he was cutting fast as he could across the south pasture, probably going to see his girl friend down in Waite Center.

Well, Uncle Enoch, you know what happened. Parson Peabody went into his spiel, first reading from the Bible and praying and talking about all the pagans who would go to bed hungry tonight and all. Alfred just sat there and didn't seem to give a hoot for the heathens. Finally, out came the medal and in no time at all poor old Alfred was smiling like a fool, his gums sticking out where teeth should be. The preacher was kind of put off by Alfred, you could tell, 'cause he laid his medal on the floor beside his chair and said, kind of impatient, "Now, Alfred, you drooling idiot, where do you keep your cash?"

Old Alfred kind of gummed out an answer and the preacher had to ask him to repeat it a couple of times before he could understand him. "All right, it's in the cellar, you say? Fine. Now, is there anything else of value down there, Alfred? Come on, tell me so I can get it for my missionary work."

Alfred chewed his lip and blubbered something. The preacher gave a start. "What's that? Tell me exactly where!" He had jumped up by now and was leaning real close to Alfred's face.

Alfred repeated his words and I could make out something

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about "gold bars." Gold bars, Uncle Enoch! Can you imagine? Alfred must have been a train robber or something when he was young!

Anyways, the preacher was as excited as I was and he raced outside to get a shovel, missing me by inches as I ducked around a corner. Then he ran back into the house, jerking open doors until he found the one that led to the cellar.

I was fit to be tied 'cause I couldn't figure how I was going to find out what the preacher planned to do down there. Finally, scared as I was, I crept into the house through the back door and edged my way toward the cellar door. I could hear huffing and puffing and scraping noises coming from the cellar. By golly, I know now what's meant by that saying about curiosity and cats. I just couldn't resist creeping ever so carefully down the cellar stairs until I could see what the preacher was in such a fit to find.

As it turned out, I wasn't in danger of being seen 'cause Peabody had only a candle to work by. Yes, he was working, you can bet your life! He was digging like he had all the heathens in China and Fangodango after him. And he was swearing at the hard dirt too, in a very unpreacher-like way. "Blasted old fool!" he puffed as he dug. "Why'd he have to bury it so deep?"

At last his shovel hit something. The preacher dug like a madman and dirt flew in every direction. But I could see what he had found. It was a big chest—an old one, it looked like—made out of wood. The preacher let out with kind of a rooster crow and kept on digging until he uncovered most of the chest—at least enough to get hold of the side handles.

By the time he pulled that chest out of the hole the preacher looked like he was about to cave in. He was sweating and panting and shaking like a leaf. To this day I'll never know how he got that chest out of the hole by himself. But he did. Seems to me pure greed gave him strength to do it.

Then he set about trying to get the lid off. There wasn't any lock on it, but the top was stuck on—from being buried all those years, I guess. By now the preacher was raving like a maniac, snarling and cussing and kicking at the chest as if he'd lost the last shred of his senses. But all that thrashing around finally paid off, by golly. Sudden-like, the top gave a loud creak and came loose—fell off, in fact. The preacher grabbed his candle quick and brought it close to the chest, kneeling down like he was in the presence of a miracle.

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In a way he was. Inside, the chest was neatly divided into sections, four of them. There were some gold bars in one part. I'd never seen anything like them before, and my, my, but they were something to see. The preacher picked up one and examined it carefully. "By God," he whispered, "By God, pure gold. Pure!"

In the second section there was cash. Stacks and stacks of it, I'm not kidding, Uncle Enoch! The bills must have been counted out and divided into equal amounts. Then each stack was tied with string. The preacher took time to count one package, then he counted off how many stacks there were. I could hear him doing arithmetic under his breath. Then he howled sort of a wolf howl and hollered, "A king's ransom!" Well, I don't think old Alfred knew any kings, but I was impressed too, I can tell you.

The third section had a bunch of papers in it. Bonds, I suppose, and probably deeds and stuff like that. The preacher went through it fast—like you, he knows about those things. Better than I do, that's a fact.

In the last compartment he found some jewelry. Now, I don't know much about that stuff either, but the preacher rolled a handful of stones out of a little bag and they must have been diamonds. He pulled a little thing out of his pocket, stuck it in his eye, and looked each stone over real careful like. Each time he'd say, "Perfect!" Then he'd go on to another. Honest, Uncle Enoch, some of those stones were big as my thumbnail. There were other stones in more little bags—red and green and blue—and some strings that must have been pearls. It was, as the preacher said, a king's ransom all over again.

When he'd finished checking everything, the preacher like to burst with joy. He jumped up and did a little war dance around the chest, almost falling into the hole in the midst of it. Suddenly he stopped dancing and says to himself, "Now, this is going to take some time to move. I'd better get back up there and deepen the trance."

When I heard that I like to fainted, but I crept back up the stairs fast as I could without making any noise. The preacher was fixing to come up right behind me, and him humming and yodeling a little tune as he stumbled toward the stairs in the dim candlelight.

I flattened myself against the wall in the kitchen, shaking and praying the preacher wouldn't be thirsty and head for the water bucket in there. He'd find me sure, and I'd be sunk.

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He was at the top of the stairs when I heard the preacher say, "Ugh!" Then he give out a holler and a grunt and a moan. Next I heard a lot of banging and bumping around like somebody was rolling a bag of potatoes down the cellar steps. After that there was nothing but a lot of silence.

For what seemed an hour I stood there scared out of my skin. You see, Uncle Enoch, I figured the preacher maybe saw my shadow and was fixing to trap me. But everything stayed still as the grave. Finally I snuck out again to see where he'd gone. At the top of the stairs I found his candle, lit it again, and went looking for the preacher.

He wasn't hard to find. He was lying in a funny kind of heap at the bottom of the stairs. Seeing's how he must be hurt bad, I forgot to be scared and rushed down to help him.

Well, there was no way that I was able to give him any kind of help. 'Cause he was dead, that's what he was. Yes, sir, Uncle Enoch, I felt his heart, but there was no beat at all. When I tried to pick him up, his head fell back sort of queer-like, and I'm sure his neck was broken. I don't think the fall killed him, though. Way I figure, Parson Peabody wasn't used to such hard work. When he tried to run up those stairs—after that digging and dancing and all—I think his heart just quit on him.

A fine mess, I told myself. Then I remembered old Alfred sitting up in that big empty room, smiling like he'd seen the Queen of Sheba. I rushed up the stairs to tell him what had happened.

Would you believe I was too late there as well? When I ran in shouting, "Mr. Freimeier, wake up, wake up!" he just kept sitting there, his chin on his chest. I grabbed his shoulders to shake him, and real slow-like he tipped forward onto the floor. I felt for *his* heartbeat, but boy, that wasn't my day to find pulses!

Alfred must have just slipped away in the middle of his meditation, and a fine way to go, I do say, as long as you have to go sometime.

I sat down on the floor and tried to figure out what to do. Here I was with two dead bodies on my hands. And me, I had no business being here in the first place. If I told the people back in town what had happened, they wouldn't believe me 'cause Parson Peabody had told them to forget everything. Old Alfred had no relatives to notify. It was downright perplexing, to tell the truth.

Finally I hit on a plan that seemed to be best for all concerned, seeing's how complicated the whole thing was.

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I dragged old Albert down the cellar stairs—easy as I could 'cause a person should show respect for the dead, you know. Then I dug the hole out a little more, made it a tad bit longer. After that I rolled Alfred over into the hole.

Next I dragged Parson Peabody over and pushed him in beside Alfred. They looked right nice together, sort of friendly, you know, going off to the Great Beyond hand in hand, you might say. Oh, they might have been a little cramped—they were sort of spoon fashion—but I don't think they cared.

After I got them all nicely covered with dirt, I smoothed it over, pulled some baskets back in place over the spot, and everything looked normal. Except for the chest. I had to do me some figuring about that, too. Finally I decided to empty it, and didn't that take some time!

I removed every last piece in it and hid them all. Not in the house. No, in my own private nooks and crannies I've got around the countryside. Won't nobody be finding that stuff, you can bet. Then I dragged the chest outside and managed to get it into the trash burner which still had some coals in it that fired up right away.

By this time it was almost dark, and I went back to my room, hungry as could be, but had to wait until morning to eat 'cause Mrs. Niesinger won't feed me if I'm not on time for supper.

Which brings me to the reason for this letter, Uncle Enoch. I know how much experience you've had with money and valuables. You've collected a lot in your business. And, well, you've been good to me, too.

After all, don't I get a card from you every Christmas and a fifty-cent piece to go with it? Other than that, I've not cost you a cent. So I know you must be proud of my git-up-and-go, as you told me when Pa and Ma died. I know, too, that you sold our farm with no trouble and that you made a mint of money on the deal. Yes, sir, you're a smart man when it comes to money.

Now, what I'd like to do is take the train to come to see you and bring you some samples of the stuff I hid. I'll bring some stones and a package of money and—oh, yes, I'll bring along the preacher's medal, too.

First off when I get there, I know you'll want me to give you a complete demonstration on how to use the medal. So you'll know just how it all happened.

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a *NEW* short story by

RUTH RENDELL

Mrs. Jones always sat on the same wooden seat facing the sea. Never on one of the other five seats. Why? Was it because of the strange story about that particular seat and its donor? What was the special attraction of the seat known by name as Rupert Moore? . . . Ruth Rendell at the top of her form . . .

TRUTH WILL OUT

by *RUTH RENDELL*

Along the sea front, between the pier and the old town, was a row of wooden seats. There were six of them, regularly spaced on the grass, and they faced the dunes, the sea wall, and the sea. To some people, including Mrs. Jones, they were known by name as Fisher, Jackson, Teague, Prendergast, Lubbock, and Rupert Moore. It was on this last seat, the one that was curiously known by the Christian as well as the family name of the man it commemorated, that Mrs. Jones invariably chose to sit.

She sat there every day, enjoying the peace and quiet, looking at the sea and thinking about the past. It was most pleasant on mild winter days or on those days of summer when the sky was overcast, for then the holiday visitors stayed in their cars or went off to buy prawns and crabs and expensive knick-knacks.

Mrs. Jones thought how glad she was that last year, when Mr. Jones had been taken from her, that she had bought the house in the old town, even though this had meant separating herself from her daughter. She thought about her son in London and her daughter in Ipswich, good loving children that they were, and about her grandchildren, and sometimes about her good fortune in having a comfortable annuity as well as her pension.

But mostly, sitting on Rupert Moore, between Fisher and

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Teague, she thought about that first man in her life to whom even now, after so long, she referred always as her darling. She had so accustomed herself to calling him this that to her the endearment had become his name. My darling, thought Mrs. Jones, as some other old woman might have thought of John or Charlie or Tom.

She felt closer to him here than anywhere, which was why she chose to rest on this seat and not on one of the others.

On July 15th, St. Swithin's Day, Hugh and Cecily Branksome sat in their car, which was parked on the promenade, and looked at the gray choppy sea. Or, rather, Hugh looked at the sea while Cecily looked at Mrs. Jones. The temperature was around ten degrees, according to Cecily who moved with the times, or 50, according to Hugh who did not. It was not yet raining, though the indications were that it soon would be.

Hugh was wishing they had gone to the Costa Brava where there would have been high-rise buildings and fish and chips and bullfights, but at least the sun would have shone. Cecily had got it into her head that it was bourgeois and unpatriotic to go abroad for one's holiday.

"I wonder why she always sits there," said Cecily.

"Who sits where?"

"That old woman. She always sits on that particular seat. She was there yesterday and the day before."

"Didn't notice," said Hugh.

"You never notice anything. While you were in the pub yesterday," said Cecily with emphasis, "I waited till she'd gone and then I read the inscription on that seat. On the metal plate on the back. D'you know what it says?"

"Of course I don't," said Hugh, opening the window to let out cigarette smoke. An icy breeze hit him in the face.

"Do close the window. It says, 'Rupert Moore gave this seat to Northwold in thanks for his deliverance. I was in prison and ye came unto me, Matthew, chapter twenty-five, verse thirty-five.' How about that?"

"Remarkable." Hugh thought he knew all about being in prison. He looked at his watch. "Opening time," he said. "We can go and get a drink, thank God."

On the following morning he went out fishing without her. They met in their room before dinner, Hugh bracing himself to

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face certain sarcastic questions, not without precedent, as to whether he had had a nice day. He forestalled them by telling her they had caught only one small mackerel, for her censure would be greater if he had enjoyed himself. But he was soon interrupted.

"I've got the whole story about the seat out of that nice man with the beard."

Hugh's memory was poor and for a moment he didn't know which seat she was talking about, but he recognized the nice man from her description. A busybody know-it-all who lived in Northwold and hung about the hotel bar.

"He insisted on buying me a drink. Well, two, as a matter of fact." She smiled archly and patted her hair as if the bearded know-it-all had, at the very least, invited her to Aldeburgh for the weekend. "His name is Arnold Cottle and he said this Rupert Moore put that seat there because he'd murdered his wife. He was put on trial and acquitted and that's what it means about 'deliverance' and being in prison."

"You can't say he murdered his wife if he was acquitted."

"You know what I mean," said Cecily. "It was ages ago, in 1930. I mean, I was only a baby." Hugh thought it wiser not to point out that at ten one is hardly a baby. "They acquitted him, or he got off on Appeal, something like that, and he came back here to live and had that seat put there. Only the local people didn't want a murderer and they broke his windows and called after him in the street and he had to go."

"Poor devil," said Hugh.

"Well, I don't know about that, Hugh. From what Arnold said, the case was very unsavory. Moore was quite young and very good-looking and he was a painter, though he had a private income. His poor wife was much older and an invalid. He gave her cyanide they'd got for killing wasps. He gave it to her in a cup of coffee."

"I thought you said he didn't do it."

"Everyone *knew* he'd done it. He only got off because the judge misdirected the jury. You can't imagine how anyone would have the nerve to put up a sort of monument, can you, after a thing like that?"

Hugh started to run his bath. Resignedly he accepted the fact, from past experience, that part of the evening would be spent in the company of Arnold Cottle. Cecily was not, and never had been, particularly flirtatious except in her own imagination. It

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was not that. Rather it was that she liked to get hold of causes or what she called examples of injustice or outrage and worry at them, roping in to assist her any helper who might be on hand.

There had been the banning of the proposed motorway, the petition against the children's playground, the eviction of the squatters down the road. She was not always reactionary, for she worshipped free speech and racial equality and health foods and clean air. She was a woman of principle who threw herself wholeheartedly into upheaval and change and battles that right might be done, and sometimes into cults for the improvement of her soul.

The unfortunate part of all this, or one of the unfortunate parts, was that it brought her so often into the company of bores or rogues. Hugh wondered what she was up to now, and why, and hoped it might be, though it seldom was, a flash in the pan.

Two hours later he found himself with his wife and Arnold Cottle, standing on the wet grass and examining the inscription on the Rupert Moore seat. It wasn't yet dark and wouldn't be for an hour. The sky was heavily overcast and the sea the color of a recently scoured aluminum pot. No one would have supposed, thought Hugh, that somewhere up there in the west was the sun which, contrary to all present evidence, science told him was throwing off light at the rate of 250,000,000 tons a minute.

The others were too rapt to be distracted. He had a look at Fisher (In memory of Colonel Marius Fisher, V.C., D.S.O., 1874-1951) and at Teague (William James Teague, of this Town, lost at the Battle of Jutland) and then he prodded Rupert Moore and announced, for something to say, "That's oak."

"It is indeed, my dear old chap." Arnold Cottle spoke to Hugh very warmly and kindly, as if he had decided *a priori* that he was a harmless lunatic. "You could get oak in those days. This seat was made by a chap called Sarafin, Arthur Sarafin. Curious name, eh? Corruption of seraphim, I daresay. Fine craftsman, lived up the coast at Lowestoft, but he died quite young, more's the pity. My father knew him, had some of the furniture he made. You can see his initials up there where the crossbar at the top joins the post. A.S. in a little circle, see?"

Hugh thought this quite interesting. He had done a bit of carpentry himself until Cecily had stopped it on the ground that she needed his workshop for her groups. That had been in the days when she was into Gestalt. Hugh preferred not to think about

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them. He had a look at Prendergast (This seat was placed here by the Hon. Mrs. Clara Prendergast that the weary might find rest) and was about to ask Cottle if this one was oak or teak, when Cecily said, "Where did he get the cyanide?"

"Moore?" said Cottle. "It was never actually proved that he did get it. He said they kept some in their garden shed for killing wasps and that his wife had taken it herself. In point of fact, Mrs. Moore had written to her sister, saying her life wasn't worth living and she wanted to put an end to it. But this gardener chappie said he'd thrown the wasp-killing stuff away a year before."

"It must have come from somewhere," said Cecily in such a hectoring tone and looking so belligerent that Hugh felt even more sympathy for Rupert Moore.

Cottle didn't seem to mind the tone or the look. "Moore had been to several chemist's shops in the area, though not actually in Northwold, and tried to buy cyanide, ostensibly for killing wasps. No chemist admitted to having let him have it. There was one in Tarrington, up the coast here, who sold him another kind of vespicide that contained no cyanide, and got him to sign the Poison Book. Dear Cecily, since you're so interested, why don't you read up the case in the library? Perhaps I might have the pleasure of taking you there tomorrow?"

The offer was accepted with enthusiasm. They all went into the Cross Keys where Hugh bought three rounds of drinks and Arnold Cottle bought none, having failed to bring his wallet with him. Cecily fastened on to the barman and elicited from him that the old woman who always sat on the Rupert Moore seat was named Mrs. Jones, that she had come to Northwold the year before from Ipswich, and was of Suffolk, though not Northwold, origin.

"Why does she always sit there?"

"Ask me another," said the barman, presumably meaning this rejoinder rhetorically, which was not the way Cecily took it.

"What's so fascinating about that seat?"

"It seems to fascinate you," said Hugh. "Can't you give it a rest? The whole thing's been over and done with for going on fifty years."

Cecily said, "There's nothing else to do in this damned place," which displeased the barman so much that he moved off in a huff. "I've got a very active brain, Hugh. You ought to know that by now. I'm afraid I'm not content to fuddle it with drink or spend

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ten hours pulling one poor little fish out of the sea."

The library visit, from which Hugh was excused, took place. But books having been secured, a journey had to be made to the house in which Rupert Moore had lived with his wife and painted his pictures and where the crime had been committed. Arnold Cottle seemed delighted at the prospect, especially as the excursion, at Cecily's suggestion, was to include lunch. Hugh had to go because Cecily couldn't drive and he wasn't going to lend his car to Cottle.

The house was a dull and ugly mansion, now used as a children's home. The superintendent (quite reasonably, Hugh thought) refused to let them tour the interior, but he had no objection to their walking about the grounds. It was bitterly cold for the time of year, but not cold enough to keep the children indoors. They tagged around behind Arnold Cottle and the Branksomes, making unfriendly or impertinent remarks. One of them, a boy with red curly hair and a cast in his eye, threw an apple core at Cecily, and when he was reproved he used a word which, though familiar, is still unexpected on the lips of a five-year-old.

They had lunch, and throughout the meal Cecily read aloud extracts from the trial of Rupert Moore. The medical evidence was so unpleasant that Hugh was unable to finish his steak *au poivre*. Cottle drank nearly a whole bottle of Nuits St. Georges and had a double brandy with his coffee. Hugh thought about men who had murdered their wives, and how much easier it must have been when you could get wasp killer made of cyanide and weed killer made of arsenic. But even if he could have got those things, or have pushed Cecily downstairs, or fixed it for the electric wall heater to fall into the bath while she also was in it, he knew he never would. Even if he got away with it, as poor Rupert Moore had, he would have the shame and the fear and the guilt for the rest of his life, again as had been the case with Rupert Moore.

Not that Moore had lived for long. "He died of some kidney disease just twelve months after they let him out," said Cecily, "and by then he'd been hounded out of this place. He had Sarafin make that seat and that was about the last thing Moore ever did in Northwold." She scanned the last chapter of her book. "There doesn't seem to have been any real motive for the murder, Arnold."

"I suppose he wanted to marry someone else," said Cottle, swigging brandy. "I remember my father saying there were rumors

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he'd had a girl friend, but nobody seemed to know her name and she wasn't mentioned at the trial."

"She certainly wasn't," said Cecily, flicking back in her book so rapidly that she nearly knocked Hugh's coffee cup over. "You mean, there was no clue as to who she was? How did the rumors start, then?"

"Dear Cecily, how do rumors ever start? In point of fact, Moore was known often to have been absent from home in the evenings. There was gossip he'd been seen in Clacton with a girl."

"Fascinating," said Cecily. "I shall spend the rest of the day thoroughly studying all this literature. You and Hugh must amuse yourselves on your own."

After a dreadful afternoon listening to Cottle's troubles, how enemies had prevented his making a success at any career, how his two attempts at getting married had been scotched by his mother, and how his neighbors had a vendetta against him, Hugh finally escaped. Though not before he had lent Cottle ten pounds, this being the lowest of the sums his guest had suggested as tenable. Cecily had had a wonderful time, making herself conversant with the Moore case, and now she was in the bath. Hugh wondered if a mighty thump on the bedroom side of the bathroom wall would dislodge the heater and make it fall into the water, but this was merely academic speculation.

After dinner he went for a walk on his own in the rain while Cecily made notes—for what purpose Hugh neither knew nor cared. He poked about in the ruins of the castle; he bought two tickets for the repertory theater on the following night, hoping that the play, though it was called "Murder-on-Sea," might distract Cecily; he wandered about the streets of the old town and he had a drink in the Oyster Catcher's Arms. On the whole he didn't have a bad time.

The morning being better—a pale sickly sun was shining and making quite attractive tints on the undersides of black clouds—he thought they might go on the beach. But Cecily had other plans. She got him to take her to Tarrington, and in the little shopping center she left him to his own devices which included buying two pairs of thicker socks. After that, because it was raining again, there was nothing to do but sit in the car park. She kept him waiting two hours.

"What d'you think?" she said. "I found that chemist, the one that sold Rupert Moore the wasp killer that hadn't got cyanide in

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it. And, would you believe it, it's still the same firm. The original pharmacist's grandson is now the manager."

"I suppose," said Hugh, "that he told you his grandfather had made a deathbed confession that he did give Moore the cyanide after all."

"Do try not to be so silly. I already knew they had cyanide wasp killer in the shop. It said so in the library book. This young man, the grandson, couldn't tell me much, but he did say his grandfather had had a very pretty young girl assistant. How about that?"

"I've noticed that very pretty young girls often do work in chemist's shops."

"I'm glad you notice something, at any rate. However, she is not the one. The grandson knows her present whereabouts, and she is a Mrs. Lewis. So I shall have to look elsewhere."

"What d'you mean, the one?" said Hugh dismally.

"My next task," said Cecily, taking no notice, "will be to hunt for persons in this case of the name of Jones. Young women, that is. I know where to begin now. Sooner or later I shall root out a girl who was an assistant in a chemist's shop at the time and who married a Jones."

"What for?"

"That right may be done," said Cecily solemnly. "That the truth may at last come out. I see it as my mission. You know I always have a mission, Hugh. It was the merest chance we happened to come to Northwold because Diana Richards recommended it. You wanted to go to Lloret de Mar. I feel it was meant we should come here because there was work for me to do. I am convinced Moore was guilty of this crime, but not alone in his guilt. He had a helper who, I believe, is alive at this moment. I'd like you to drive me to Clacton now. I shall begin by interviewing some of the oldest inhabitants."

So Hugh drove to Clacton where he lost a pound on the slot machines. Indefatigably Cecily pursued her investigations.

Mrs. Jones came back from morning service at St. Mary's, and although she was a good walker and not at all tired, for she had slept well ever since she came to Northwold, she sat down for half an hour on her favorite seat. Two other elderly people who had also been in church were sitting on Jackson (In memory of Bertrand Jackson, 1859-1924, Philanthropist and Lover of the Arts).

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Mrs. Jones nodded pleasantly to them, but she didn't speak. It wasn't her way to waste in chat time that was more satisfactorily spent in reminiscence.

A pale gray mackerel sky, a fitful sun. Perhaps it would brighten up later. She thought about her daughter who was coming to lunch. Brenda would be tired after the drive, for the children, dears though they were, would no doubt be troublesome in the car. They would all enjoy that nice piece of sirloin and the Yorkshire pudding and the fresh peas and the chocolate ice cream. She had got in a bottle of sherry so that she and Brenda and Brenda's husband could each have a glass before the meal.

Her son and daughter had been very good to her. They knew she had been a devoted wife to their father, and they didn't resent the place in her love she kept for her darling. Not that she had ever spoken of him in front of their father or of them when they were small. That would have been unkind and in bad taste. But later she had told them about him and told Brenda, in expansive moments, about that long-past happiness and the tragedy of her darling's death, he so young and handsome and gifted.

Perhaps, this afternoon when the rest of them were on the beach, she might allow herself the luxury of mentioning him again. Discreetly, of course, because she had always respected Mr. Jones and loved him after a fashion, even though he had taken her away to Ipswich and never attained those heights of talent and success her darling would have enjoyed had he lived. Tranquilly, not unhappily, she recalled to her mind his face, his voice, and some of their conversations.

Mrs. Jones was disturbed in her reverie by the presence of that tiresome woman. She had seen her before, hanging about on the promenade and once examining the seat that Mrs. Jones thought of as her own. An ugly thin neurotic-looking woman who was sometimes in the company of a sensible elderly man and sometimes with that shameless scrounger, old Cottle's boy, whom Mrs. Jones, in her old-fashioned way, called a barfly. Today, however, she was alone, and to Mrs. Jones's dismay, was approaching her with intent to speak.

"Do excuse me for speaking to you, but I've seen you here so often."

"Oh, yes?" said Mrs. Jones. "I've seen you too. I'm afraid I have to go now. I've guests for lunch."

"Please don't go. I won't keep you more than a moment. But I

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must tell you I'm terribly interested in the Moore case. I can't help wondering if you knew him, you're here so much."

"I knew him," said Mrs. Jones distantly.

"That's terribly exciting." And the woman did look very excited. "I suppose you first met him when he came into the shop?"

"That's right," said Mrs. Jones, and she got up. "But I don't care to talk about it. It's a very long time ago and it's best forgotten. Good morning."

"Oh, but please . . . !"

Mrs. Jones ignored her. She walked far more rapidly than usual, breathing heavily, along the path toward the old town. She was flustered and upset and very put out. To rake up all that now just when she was thinking of the lovely events of that time! For that day, though not, she hoped, for the future, the encounter had spoiled the seat for her.

"Had a good day with Cottle?" said Hugh.

"Don't speak to me about that man. Can you imagine it, I phoned him and a woman answered! She turned out to be some creature on holiday like us who was taking him to Lowestoft in her car. I could come too if I liked. No, thank you very much, I said. What about my finding the girl called Jones? I said. And he was pleased to tell me I was getting *obsessional.* So I gave him a piece of my mind, and that's the last of Arnold Cottle."

And the last of his ten pounds, thought Hugh. "So you went on the beach instead?"

"I did not. While you were out in that boat I researched on my own. And most successfully, I may add. You remember that old man in Clacton, the one in the old folks' home? Well, he was quite fit enough to see me today, and I questioned him exhaustively."

Hugh said nothing. He guessed who had been exhausted.

"Ultimately," said Cecily, "I was able to prod him into remembering. I asked him to try and recall everyone he had ever known called Jones. And at last he remembered a local policeman, a Constable Jones, who got married in or around 1930. And the girl he married worked in *a local chemist's shop.* How about that?"

"You mean she was Moore's girl friend?"

"Isn't it obvious? Her name was Gladys Palmer. She is now Mrs. Jones. Moore was seen about with a girl in Clacton. This girl lived in Clacton and worked in a Clacton chemist's shop. Now it's quite evident that Moore was having a love affair with Gladys

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Palmer and that he persuaded her to give him the cyanide from the shop where she worked. The *real* evidence is that, according to all the books, that was one of the few chemist's shops from which Moore *never tried to obtain cyanide!*"

"That's real evidence?" said Hugh.

"Of course it is, to anyone with any deductive powers. Gladys Palmer took fright when Moore was found guilty, so she married a policeman for protection, and the policeman's name was Jones. Isn't that proof?"

"Proof of what?"

"Don't you ever remember anything? The barman in that Cross Keys place told us the old woman who sits on the Rupert Moore seat was a Mrs. Jones." Cecily smiled triumphantly. "They are one and the same."

"But it's a very common name."

"Maybe. But Mrs. Jones has admitted it. I spoke to her this morning before I went to Clacton. She has admitted knowing Moore and that she first met him when he came into the shop. How about that? And she was very nervous and upset, I can tell you, as well she might be."

Hugh stared at his wife. He didn't at all like the turn things were taking. "Cecily, it may be so. It looks like it, but it's no business of ours. I wish you'd leave it."

"Leave it! For nearly fifty years this woman has got off scot-free when she was as much guilty of the murder of Mrs. Moore as Moore was, and you say leave it! It's her guilt brings her to that seat day after day, isn't it? Any psychologist would tell you that."

"She must be at least seventy. Surely she can be left in peace now?"

"I'm afraid it's much too late for that, Hugh. There must be an inquiry, all the facts must come out. I have written three letters, one to the Home Secretary, one to the Chief Commissioner at Scotland Yard, and a third to the author of this very incomplete book. There they are on the dressing table. Perhaps you'd like to look at them while I have my bath."

Hugh looked at them. If he were to tear them up she would only write them again. If he walked into that bathroom now and dislodged the heater from the wall and it fell into the water, and she died and it was called an accident . . . The letters would never be sent, he could have his workshop back, he could chat with pretty girls who worked in chemist's shops, and go on holiday to the

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Costa Brava and be free. He sighed heavily and went down to the bar to get a drink.

Thank goodness, thought Mrs. Jones, that woman wasn't anywhere to be seen this morning. The intrusion of yesterday had upset her for hours, even after Brenda arrived, but she was getting over it now. Unfortunately, in a way, the weather had taken a turn for the better, and several of the seats were occupied. But not Rupert Moore. Mrs. Jones sat down on it and put her shopping bag on the ground at her feet.

She was aware of the proximity of the barfly who was sitting on Lubbock (Elizabeth Anne Lubbock, for many years Headmistress of Northwold Girls High School) and with him was a different woman, much younger than the other and very well-dressed. With an effort Mrs. Jones expelled them from her mind. She looked at the calm blue sea and felt the warm and firm pressure of the oak against her back and thought about her darling.

How sweet their love and companionship had been! It had endured for such a short time, and then separation and the unbearable loneliness. But she had been right to marry Mr. Jones, for he had been a good husband and she the wife he wanted, and without him there would have been no Brian and no Brenda and no money to buy the house and come here every day to remember. If her darling had lived, though, and the children had been his, and if she had had him to sit beside her on his seat and be the joy of her old age . . .

"Do forgive me," said a voice, "but I'm a local man myself, and I happened to be in Lowestoft yesterday and someone told me they'd heard you'd come back to this part of the world to live."

Mrs. Jones looked at the barfly. Was there to be no end to it?

"I've seen you on this seat and I did wonder, and when this friend in Lowestoft told me your present name, all was clear."

"I see," said Mrs. Jones, gathering up her shopping bag.

"I want you to know how greatly I admire his work. My father had some charming examples of it—all sold now, alas—and anyone can see this seat was made by a craftsman compared with the others." Her stony face, her hostility, made him hesitate. "You are," he said, "who I think you are, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," said Mrs. Jones crossly, another morning spoiled. "Arthur Sarafin was my first husband. And now I really must be on my way."

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Alfred Kuan's first story, "A Matter of Physics," appeared in the May 1975 issue of EQMM. Now, more than three years later, we publish his second effort (and how different it is!)—a homespun, folks-down-home kind of story we rarely see these sophisticated days . . . Albert Eakins was a mild, patient, peaceable man—it took a lot to rile him . . .

GOOD FENCES

by ALFRED KUAN

The first time I seen that big dog running around in my lower pasture I figured we might have some trouble with the new people up at the Gracey place.

I heard they paid pretty near twice what the place was worth and spent another bundle fixing it up, though, goodness knows, it had been good enough for old man Gracey and would have been good enough for anyone else around here.

On the day they moved in there was moving vans in the dooryard and furniture all over, and tons and tons of boxes and who knows whatall.

"Looks like they're setting up to go in the department store business," I told Alma.

"It surely does," she said.

I love my Alma. We've been together a long time and she used to be a grade-school teacher before our children started coming—six children, all of them raised right and doing well on their own, except one dead in Vietnam, a good boy, and another a cocktail waitress in New York.

Anyway, enough of that. It don't do any good raking things over.

The first thing was, this was the late fall and me and a couple of neighbors had butchered a hog the day before, so we had plenty of fresh, good, corn-fed and milk-sweetened pork laid down in the

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freezer and a nice roast cooking in the kitchen woodstove for our Sunday supper. You may laugh if you haven't had it, but there ain't no hogmeat you can buy in no store that's half so good.

"You know," I said to Alma, "those folks up on the hill been unpacking and straightening up all day. They might appreciate a good dinner."

"I was thinking the same, but what about your sandwiches?"

"Never mind about me. I can't taste nothing in that mill anyway."

So she cuts the roast in half and makes a covered-dish supper with a salad and hot soda biscuits and a blueberry pie, packs it all up in a hamper, and trots over, along about six.

First thing I know she's back with the basket and all. The sun hadn't moved ten minutes' worth.

"They didn't want it?" I asked.

"No, Albert."

"Must've been too good for them. Some folks don't know what good eating is." I tried to josh her, but I could see she was hurt. "Suppertime," I said, and took the basket and headed up the hill behind the barn. We sat up there in the hay stubble and ate that supper and watched the sun set; then we came down the hill to the house hand in hand in the cold dark like a couple of old folks.

About an hour later when we'd washed up and was watching television, she told me that the wife had been pleasant enough and greeted her like a neighbor, but hadn't asked her onto the porch and had kept her standing in the dooryard like a beggar. As for the supper, she said thank you, that's mighty kind, but she and her husband were both on diets and could only eat special things, so they couldn't accept it.

That was the first thing, and the second thing was the signs.

There's a whole lot of hunting and fishing around here. For most people it's a way of filling the pot, and some of them don't pay too much attention to the official seasons, or even to licenses, which the fat boys in the legislature have been jacking up year by year to some sky-high price. Hunting's important, awful important, to a lot of folks hereabouts.

And what do I see when I come home the next night but brand-new No Trespassing signs all around the Gracey place. It's quite a good-sized place, 400 acres more or less of field and forest, with a lot of hayfields and pastures that have good bird cover. It was one of the places that the state boys put in ringnecks.

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I'll tell you how it is: I hunt over your land; you hunt over my land; we both get the good of it and nobody's hurt. Anybody's welcome to hunt my place and if they mess around with the gates or shoot too close to the house or do some other foolishness, then they're invited to stay the hell away. I've only run into a few like that, and there's a good dozen boys that comes here in different times of the year. We've all got to be friends and some of them will leave a pair of fat trout or rabbits at the house, which always goes good, though it ain't expected.

Posting is like shutting the door in a man's face. Some folks feel they have to do it, with so many city boys raising heck and shooting cows. There's one I heard about who shot a cow that had COW painted on it in big white letters, and somebody got shotgunned in the face by somebody that come around the house when the folks was away. And every now and again there's a young one shot, and like that.

So a lot of folks post their land nowadays, but they go around first and let everybody know the signs don't mean them and they can hunt like always.

Because of the signs I was steamed up some when I got to the house. Alma met me on the porch like she always does, with a big glass of ice with plain tonic and wine mixed half and half, which I dearly love after a hard day. She kissed me on the cheek and said she had something to tell me, but I was to cool down first. When she says that, it always worries me. I'm a mild man, and I don't like her thinking I ain't. But I drank my drink and washed up and we had supper, which was extra good because she had got a half gallon of fresh buttermilk and made scalloped potatoes.

When the dishes was done she told me that the neighbors appeared to have a couple of girls and they'd been riding horses all over the upper field all day.

"I went up and told them to leave," she said. "They did, but I had hardly gotten back to the house when they were at it again. They were playing some kind of game."

"Did you call their folks?"

"I did, and their father said he would speak to them when they got home."

"He didn't go get them?"

"No."

I looked it over the next morning, and the field was tore up some, but not too terrible bad, and I just chalked it up to keeping

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peace in the neighborhood. I didn't like it, not a bit.

That was the third thing, and the fourth thing was the brook.

Down in front of our place is a swimming hole I dug out from a natural deep spot years ago and made into a place where the boys and I could swim and fish a little. From the porch, when it was quiet, you could hear the fish jumping in the evenings. Below there was the place my stock watered.

About a week after the horses in the field, a bulldozer started tearing up the brook up above at the Gracey place, and I soon saw a dam was going in. The sweet-running brook turned to silt and started drying up.

There is such a thing as riparian rights, and I thought about going to court about it. I knew I was in the right. But a poor man can't win in a court fight against a rich man. A rich man just keeps going on and on until a poor man's money runs out. And that's how come some barns get burnt.

"Alma, I got a problem with them folks up there."

"I know, Albert. I can see they're bothering you. I hope you don't get impetuous."

"I ain't been impetuous in thirty years."

"Oh, Albert, you're the most impetuous man I know."

It pleases her to think that, I guess.

Anyway, I studied on it a couple days. The matter of the brook was more than a little serious. I figured that once he got his pond filled he wouldn't be content to let it go at that. He seemed to me to be the kind who would always be showing off his dam to his friends, pulling it up and letting it down, so one day my herd would have a river and the next a mudhole.

I picked the next Sunday afternoon, thinking that he'd be rested and in an easy set of mind, specially if he was a church-going man.

I put on my best shirt and a good pair of creased trousers with my church shoes, and I trudged down my drive, up the state road, and up his drive. I stood in his dooryard and hallooed.

Nobody came to the door but their cars were both in the barn, and I could hear some music around back. I hallooed louder and pretty soon this man came around the corner of the house with that big black dog ahead of him. The dog circled around me.

There wasn't anything special about the man—just an average man in his middle fifties with a reddish face and not much black hair left. Anybody would have known he hadn't worked a day of

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his life in the fields, and probably not in a factory either. He was wearing those thin dungarees and a short-sleeved blue shirt with elastic at the bottom, and no shoes. He was holding a highball.

"Yes," he said, looking a little peeved. The dog was sniffing at my shoes.

"Mr. Haseltine?" I asked—that was the name on his fifty-dollar mailbox. "I'm your neighbor, Albert Eakins, over there, and I want to talk to you, if you don't mind."

"If it's about the field, you should have had signs up."

"Mr. Haseltine, I just ask you to respect my rights as I respect yours." I could see him bridling. "Your girls—"

"They aren't my girls. That was my wife's daughter and a friend," he said, smartish.

"Well, they're welcome to ride on my place if they don't go through new-planted fields or spoil fences, and leave the gates the way they find them, open or shut."

"I'm sure that's very, very generous of you. We have five hundred acres here, and we won't be needing to accept your kind invitation. Is that all?" The dog was getting intimate with my leg. I pushed him off.

"No," I said. "I come about the brook."

"The brook? What about the brook? Look, I have guests here. I'd like to get back to them."

"Won't take a minute. You see, my waterhole is down below you, as you can see there. Since you put the dam in, I've been having to pump an awful lot of water up at the barn because the hole's been either dry or too thick with silt for me to let the beeves drink. It's running up my electric bill, thirty dollars a month or more."

"I'm not going to pay for that."

"I'm not asking you to," I answered, mild as I could. "I just ask you now to let the dam alone and let the brook run the way it always has. Don't put the dam gate up or down or nothing."

"Well," he says, "that brook is on my property and I own it. That dam is on my property and I own that too. Why shouldn't I do anything I want?"

"It's because of riparian rights, Mr. Haseltine. It is your dam, it is your brook, but people downstream have rights to the water, and that the flow of the water shouldn't be interfered with."

"You know," he said in a way that must have scared the devil out of hundreds of old clerks and secretaries, "I come up here to

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get away from neighbors like you. I tell you this: if you don't like what I do, sue me."

"You'll always have neighbors, Mr. Haseltine, even in the graveyard." He turned and started back around the house. "And I can't afford to take you to court," I added, but he was gone.

The dumb dog was still pestering me, so I shied a rock at him and went home.

"There's no talking to him," I told Alma.

"Some people are like that."

"I'm going to wait a while and see what happens."

"Yes, that would be good."

What happened was he dumped his barbecue coals that night into a pile of slash and started a woods fire that burned through ten acres of my woodlot.

Me and the firemen were out there all night and I had to work all the next day with no sleep. When I came home, there was a new gate across Haseltine's drive with a sign on it: Absolutely No Trespassing! This Means *YOU*!

I went to a lodge meeting that night and when I got home at ten p.m., the Chief of Police was in the sitting room with Alma.

"Hi, George," I said. "What brings you way out here this time of night?"

"Your neighbor Haseltine says you planted some kind of bomb in his dam and blew it up."

"His dam? Somebody blew it up?"

"Ayuh."

"It wasn't me, but I'd like to thank the man that did it. I would. I'd like to shake his hand."

"Meaning no offense, Al, but can you prove it wasn't you?"

"I can't prove it wasn't me any more than you can prove it wasn't you."

"He says you had words with him about it just yesterday."

"I did, but I was at a Grange meeting tonight. What time did it happen, anyway?"

"About eight."

"We was in the middle of the ritual. Twenty people know I was there."

"You could have made a time bomb."

"Sure, George, I would have made it between being up all night fighting a woods fire he started and then working all day. Check the mill. They'll say I was there, all day."

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"You still could have done it, not saying that you did, but you could have. No doubt you've got dynamite for stumps and caps and such."

"Yes, I usually keep a few sticks around."

"Can I see it?"

"Follow me." I led him out to a shelf in the horse stall in the ell and pointed out a stout wooden box with a fitted cover.

"Open it, please."

I did, and showed him. There were eight or nine sticks of dynamite.

"Any gone?" the Chief asked.

"Not that I notice."

"I don't know who blew up that dam, but it must've been Russian paratroopers or somebody." The Chief grinned.

"It wasn't me, George, not that I didn't have cause."

"I believe you, Al. Good night. Sorry to have bothered you."

"No bother at all. Take care now."

"You too." He smiled.

Alma stood with me in the door as we saw him off. "Trouble, trouble, I don't like it. I wish the Haseltines had never come here."

"So do I," I said, "but there's no good wishing against what's so."

"You're right."

And so to bed, with worried minds.

At the mill the next day I was watching one of the pulp vats when Scoggins, the general foreman, stopped by me.

"Hear you blew up Haseltine's dam."

"Not me. I plead ignorant."

"Seriously, he's a banker in Boston, and a few people around here hope he can do something for this little burg, a man with his background and contacts."

"You can't prove it by me."

"Anyway, I sure hope nothing more happens to him."

I let go of the valve handle and looked him in the eye. "I do too. I don't want to go to prison for something I ain't done."

"Right," he said, reddening, and walked away.

I went back to my work.

It was quiet for a few days until Haseltine's dog came over one night and killed a couple of our chickens. Alma said he was harassing our beeves the next afternoon.

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I phone Haseltine and ask him to keep his dog to home. He tells me there's no law to make him do that. I says yes, but dogs attacking any domestic animal can be shot on the spot, without a trial or a defense lawyer or anything. He hung up on me and he didn't keep his dog to home.

About a week later the dog was found run over in the road between his place and mine.

Would you believe he had an autopsy done on that dog? I never heard of such a thing. And they found a bullet in it. At least that's what Haseltine screamed at me on the telephone. He said that dog cost him $1200 and more than that to keep. He declared he would have it out of me one way or the other. I wished him luck.

"Al," the Chief said, "I notice he's put up his dam again. Is it going to blow up all by itself?"

"Beats me."

"Did you shoot his dog?"

"No. On the Bible, I didn't."

"This is getting monotonous."

"It sure is," I agreed.

"Well, take care."

"You too," I said.

But he was back in an hour to arrest me on a complaint signed by Haseltine, and I spent the night in jail.

While I was trying to sleep there, Haseltine's barn caught fire. The firemen got there fast, but not before sparks had caught the roof of the house and that was burning too.

When they went to pump water from Haseltine's pond, they found it dry. Haseltine had let the water out to put in a diving board.

The horses and the cars were saved, but not much else, the Chief told me in the morning.

"No one hurt?"

"No."

"Thank goodness for that," I sighed.

After a while bail was set and I was released on my own recognizance. I got to work two hours late and a scowling Scoggins was waiting. He started right in on me.

"Did you burn down Haseltine's house?"

"I hardly could've, being as I was in jail at the time."

"Well, somebody did, and I think it was you."

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"I'd be a little more careful how I talked if I was you, Mr. Scoggins."

"Is that a threat? Is my house going to burn down too?"

"Mr. Scoggins, if you have nothing more to say to me than that, I'd like to be getting about my work."

"I'll tell you what to do, and when!"

"Yes, Mr. Scoggins. I'm waiting."

"Ah, go to hell, you!"

"I can't oblige you on that, Mr. Scoggins," I said to his retreating back. It seemed I was talking to a lot of backs lately, and it hurt me because I had known and respected Scoggins for 30 years. You never know what'll happen when money power turns against you.

We had a little money in the bank, and in a few years Alma and I could draw our Social Security. With what little earnings I had from raising the few beef cattle and selling hay and feed corn, and with the help of the kitchen garden and our chickens and a pig or two, we could make out fine. It wouldn't be fancy, but it would be good enough.

It wasn't that I was worried about Scoggins. I'm a member of the paper workers union and we have good protections from bosses who'd like to fire us for parting our hair on the wrong side. But I don't want to work in a place where I'm not wanted, and I don't have to.

I was thinking on that at about four p.m. when I was called to the phone in Scoggins' office. Him and his secretary eyed me as I took the call. It was the Chief of Police and he told me to get right home.

"Is Alma okay? Nothing's happened to Alma?"

"No, everything's fine, but there's been some excitement."

"Okay," I said, and hung up.

"Mr. Scoggins, I have to go home now."

"You leave your station and I'll take you down to personnel."

"It's police orders, Mr. Scoggins. You can check with the Chief later. Good afternoon to you."

I had never done anything like that in more than 20 years at that mill, and I left him with his mouth hanging open.

I took it slower than I felt like going on the way home, not wanting to get in an accident and be useless when I might be needed most. When I saw Haseltine's car next to my house, I pulled up in a shower of gravel, just like on television.

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Haseltine was half lying on the ground, propped up against one side of the house. Nearby was a gas can and some rags. Alma was standing in the yard, holding my old double-barrel on him.

"It's all right, Albert," Alma said.

The Chief came roaring up the drive and pulled up quick.

"Alma!" he shouted. "Are you all right?"

I gawped at him. "You just told me she was all right!"

"I lied a little," the Chief said. "I didn't really know for sure. She called the station and said Haseltine was trying to burn your house down but she'd beaned him with a rolling pin."

"My goodness, Alma!"

"He didn't know or care if anyone was inside," she said. "I was in the kitchen, baking, and he drove up and got out with that can of gas. I went out the back door and circled behind him. He threw some gasoline on the clapboards, there, and he was starting to stuff the rags in the neck of the can so he could soak them and light them. I hit him before he could. I never thought I could do it. Until I dynamited the dam and shot the dog, I never did anything like this."

"Alma!"

"Yes, I did it, and the admission is overdue." She broke open the shotgun and put it on the grass. "It wasn't loaded," she said. She walked a few steps to the Chief, keeping a blazing eye on Haseltine, who had recovered some and was staring at her. She held out her hands. "Put the cuffs on, George," she said.

"What on earth's got into you?" I said.

"I never would have believed it," the Chief muttered.

Whereupon George told Haseltine he was under arrest on suspicion of attempted arson, suspicion of attempted murder, suspicion of attempted malicious damage, and suspicion of attempted outdoor burning without a permit from the fire warden. He read him his rights, handcuffed him behind his back, and put him in the back seat of the cruiser.

He gathered the gas can, the rags, and splintered off a piece of clapboard that the gas had soaked, and put it all in plastic bags in his trunk. He told me to lock up the house, which I did after taking two burnt-to-cinders pies out of the oven.

Then the four of us went down to the station, where it all came out in the wash. The Chief was methodical, and he started with the dam. Alma was frank about it. I wanted to get a lawyer but Alma insisted she didn't need any lawyer.

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It was just a little dam, she said, and she had only taken one stick of dynamite and blown it up a little bit. The rush of the water had done the rest. She hadn't intended I should know about it, because I would've probably tried to take the blame.

George, who up to then had been looking real official behind his desk with the flags on it, took off his hat and wiped the sweatband with a bandanna.

"That's malicious damage over $100. I think that's a felony," he said.

"No, it isn't," Alma declared. "There wasn't anything malicious about it at all. That man was holding up water we had a legal right to. Albert had tried to talk to him, and he hadn't gotten any satisfaction. I did what I had to, doing the least damage possible."

"You could've opened the sluiceway."

"It was under lock and chain."

"There's trespassing."

"Trespassing isn't a crime, it's a tort—I looked it up in the library in town—and if Mr. Haseltine wants to sue me he'll have to show I damaged his grass by walking on it."

"It's a crime if a place is posted, and his is," the Chief protested.

"Trespassing on a posted place is only a crime if the owner or his agent orders me off and I fail to leave. I told you I looked it all up. He didn't order me off. He didn't even see me."

Then she laughed.

"This is serious, Alma," the Chief scowled.

"Sorry."

"Well, maybe we don't have a case on the dam. Not that I want to put you in jail, but I'm sworn to uphold the law."

"Of course, George. I understand." I swear she patted him on the arm. She did have him in school, one year, and had told me he was a splendid little boy, with a sunny disposition.

"Look at it like this, George," she said. "Suppose you found out that someone had taken your car, without any right to it, put it on his own property, and built a solid wall around it. Wouldn't you have a right to go onto his property and break down that wall any way you could? Albert and I own our farm. I had a right to blow up that dam a little to get what's ours!"

"You can't take the law into your own hands!"

"Yes, you can, George. And everyone has to, in small ways. Sometimes the small ways have to become larger ways."

"Okay, I give up. But what about the dog?"

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"The poor thing had been hit by a car and was suffering. Its hindquarters were crushed. I took Albert's deer rifle from the house and put the creature out of its pain. I couldn't tell anyone because there was already too much trouble in the neighborhood. It's another case of taking the law into my own hands. I had no right, under the law, to destroy someone else's animal. But it was morally imperative that I do it!"

"You're too much for me, Alma," the Chief said, moving to open the door.

"Wait a minute," I nearly shouted. "The house. The fire." I felt like a fool for reminding the Chief. But then I realized that he could scarcely have forgotten.

"Oh, that's nothing, Al," he said.

"Nothing?" I gasped.

"No. While Haseltine was busy getting drunk at the motel bar this afternoon, his daughter and her girl friend were smoking grass in the high school girls' room. A teacher caught the smell and hauled them off to the principal's office, grass and all. The Haseltine girl was defiant. Said she'd done it all the time in the city and nobody thought anything of it. She said we're all a bunch of hicks up here. The principal said he regretted she thought that way about us, and that she was expelled. She said it was just as well, she'd burnt the house down yesterday and there wasn't any reason for her family to stay."

"My God!"

"Oh, it was an accident. She'd been smoking in the barn and set the hay on fire. She was scared to tell her father until it was too late, so she waited until it was going good, then pretended to discover it. That's how the horses and cars were saved. Her father still thinks it was you, Al."

"Stubborn cuss, isn't he? Come on, Alma, let's go home."

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

PATRICIA McGERR's "The Day of the Bookmobile"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The long dearth of mystery movies is over; more thrillers are about to be released than we have space to write about them. Don't miss *Foul Play,* which has as its dark center the attempted assassination of the Pope while on a visit to San Francisco, but is withal a delightful comedy-chiller in which Goldie Hawn and Chevy Chase demonstrate how murder can bring nice people together. Writer-director Colin Higgins' passion for Hitchcock (his *Silver Streak* had more than one touch of *The Lady Vanishes*) makes this film a far truer homage to the Master than the excessive *High Anxiety.* Still ahead of us are the culinary cookouts of *Someone Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe,* and even such family fantasy as *Heaven Can Wait* uses a murder plot to speed things up.

Christie enthusiasts can look forward with pleasure to *Death on the Nile,* the elegant follow-up to *Murder on the Orient Express,* shot on location in England and Egypt and even more lavish than its predecessor. Now Peter Ustinov plays the "humourist and humanist" Hercule Poirot, and —surprisingly—he does *not* camp the role; he does full justice to the Belgian's ego and foibles but is respectful, and when he reconstructs the crime one sees those grey cells crackle and spark. There are several murders on the steamer *Karnak* sailing down the Nile, and a gorgeous passenger list of eccentrics (Bette Davis, Maggie Smith, fragile Mia Farrow, and David Niven as Poirot's Watsonian Colonel Race). It's a lush, leisurely journey and a first-class puzzle; you'll find it a trip worth taking.

The real-life mystery concerning Mrs. Christie's week-long 1926 disappearance will soon be treated in the film *Agatha,* with Vanessa Redgrave as the authoress and Dustin Hoffman as the American reporter who finally finds her—and her secret. Kathleen Tynan, wife of British critic Kenneth Tynan, wrote the screenplay and the book based on it (Ballantine, $7.95); she recently told EQMN that the work is a

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"speculative reconstruction" which fits facts and might possibly have really happened. Certainly it is true to the psychological make-up of a distraught, complex, fascinating woman who could draw upon vast resources of imagination. As does Tynan, but she grounds her fancy in an authentic period portrait based on research—interviewing the journalists and police who covered the case and even visiting the Christie home (called *Styles!*). *Agatha* promises to be a novel explanation of a celebrated vanishing act.

On a briefer note: most of psychic fashion photographer Faye Dunaway's friends are murdered around her in the kinky *Eyes of Laura Mars,* a mystery somewhat bewildering in its solution but interestingly bizarre, the closest we've come so far to matching the work of Dario Argento and the Italian avant-garde; more calmly, young Mark Hamill sets tracks for car thieves in Las Vegas in the engaging *Corvette Summer,* a slight pursuit film (by the writers of the fine *Sugarland Express* fugitive story) but pleasing and very 1978 Americana. It will be a busy mystery screen in the months ahead.

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INTERVIEW: KEN FOLLETT

Eye of the Needle, which soared onto the bestseller list immediately upon publication, is an espionage thriller in the mode of *Day of the Jackal.* The eleventh novel by Ken Follett, it is only the second book of his to be published in the United States.

EQMM: Have your previous ten books been espionage novels?

FOLLETT: No — all mysteries.

EQMM: Why did you change over and write a spy novel?

FOLLETT: None of my mysteries was a bestseller.

EQMM: Then you specifically set out to write a bestseller when you wrote *Eye of the Needle?*

FOLLETT: That's right, but that is also what I had in mind when I wrote the others. It takes a long time to get it right. (*Editor's note:* Follett is 29.)

EQMM: When it was finished, did you know you had something special—a smash?

FOLLETT: I did. In fact, as I was writing it I kept telling my wife, "This is the big one." I wasn't as sure as I sounded, but I definitely had a sense that this would be considerably more successful than anything else I'd ever done. I had no idea, however, that it would make me a millionaire. That doesn't enter anybody's head, does it? But when I learned that the minimum sale price for paperback rights was to be more than I had ever earned for a book I was pleased as Punch because it meant I could be a writer for another year, anyhow.

EQMM: Have you ever known

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anyone like Faber—The Needle?

FOLLETT: No, he's a character I've been writing all my life. All my heroes have been about that age. I've been writing the forty-year-old sensitive tough guy in all my books. And that's because he's me. I've been forty ever since I was eighteen.

EQMM: Do you regard Faber as the *hero?*

FOLLETT: There is no question that he's the central character, and people do identify with him despite the fact that he is some kind of monster.

EQMM: Apart from age, do the heroes of your other books share many characteristics with Faber?

FOLLETT: They all have an ultimate ruthlessness, which *may* be in me. Perhaps that's why it recurs.

EQMM: Then you are yourself the prototype of Die Nadel and your other heroes?

FOLLETT: You have to be because I don't think you can write a character with any depth or conviction unless he is in some way an aspect of your own personality.

EQMM: You point out that Faber is a monster. Could you kill anyone?

FOLLETT: I very much doubt it. Certainly not the way Faber does. I saw my first dead body on a research trip to the morgue. I wish I hadn't. I never, ever, want to see another autopsy, and I'll be quite happy if I never see another corpse.

EQMM: Do you admire Faber's ability to do "whatever is necessary"—even if it means killing someone?

FOLLETT: Yes. It is a hard thing to admire but, I suppose, ultimately, yes. And, to go back a bit, I suppose, ultimately, I could kill someone. I'm reluctant to say it because it is too easy to say, but it is probably something we all have in us. Some of us are just more reluctant to release it.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Though it is an intriguing notion, rarely in the history of detective fiction have two writers collaborated on a story in which their respective series characters meet and work on a case together. The first such instance was the teaming up of Stuart Palmer's Hildegarde Withers and Craig Rice's John J. Malone in the short story "Once Upon a Train" (*EQMM,* October 1950). A series of joint appearances followed, and the six stories were collected in Palmer and Rice's 1963 volume, *The People Vs. Withers and Malone.*

In 1959, a couple of popular paperback private eyes, Richard S. Prather's Shell Scott and Stephen Marlowe's Chester Drum, got together for a case

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called *Double in Trouble*. There has also been at least one instance of series characters (Joe Gores' Dan Kearny and Richard Stark's Parker) making guest appearances in each other's adventures, but I know of no other full-dress pairing of this kind prior to the recent collaboration of two San Francisco detectives and their creators.

*** Bill Pronzini and Colin Wilcox: *Twospot,* Putnam, $8.95. The encounter of the pulp-collecting, lung-congesting, nameless private eye and the ex-football player cop Lt. Frank Hastings is slick, fast-moving, and very readable. The two likeable, complex heroes trade off on the first-person narration and, working mostly independently of each other, share the crime-fighting load pretty equally. Fans of both series should be satisfied. Much of the early part of the book takes place at a California winery, an interesting and well-depicted background, though the closed-circle whodunit that seems to be developing there soon gives way to a much larger-scale intrigue, very suspensefully resolved. Pronzini's private eye is finally given a first name at least. It should surprise no one that the name is Bill.

**** Pauline Glen Winslow: *Copper Gold,* St. Martin's, $8.95. Like most newer writers of detective fiction (and all female English ones), Winslow is being advanced as a successor to Agatha Christie. The comparison is both inaccurate and unfair. Her plots ramble and sprawl, utterly unlike Christie's, and her greatest strength is in creating memorable characters, from Superintendent Capricorn and his dotty show-biz aunts to the obscurest walk-on players (and there are many). Though ultimately positive, her picture of English society is often as darkly drawn as Sjöwall-Wahlöö's Sweden. Like Colin Dexter, she tries to reconcile contemporary realism with Golden Age artifice, and the result is mystery novels not quite like anyone else's. Though limited comparisons are possible, Winslow is an original. (On the debit side, this may be the most badly proofread book I have ever seen from a major publisher.)

*** John R. Feegel: *Death Sails the Bay,* Avon, $1.95. A winner of the paperback Edgar for his previous mystery, *Autopsy,* lawyer-pathologist Feegel could well repeat with this well-written and suspenseful inverted detective story. Though the novel generally carries its above-average length well, it has one characteristic of the padded "blockbuster"-type novel: carefully constructed and detailed backgrounds for characters not important enough to the story to warrant them.

*** Richard Neely: *No Certain Life,* HBJ/Jove, $1.50. In this tale of a screenwriter and an actress fleeing her disturbed and possibly murderous husband, Neely continues his game of reader bamboozlement. This time I thought I saw his surprise finale

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coming before the halfway point, but he fooled me again.

** Joe Morella and Edward Z. Epstein: *The Ince Affair,* Signet, $1.75. The 1924 death of film pioneer Thomas H. Ince, which may or may not have taken place on William Randolph Hearst's yacht and may or may not have been the result of a shooting, is one of the movie colony's enduring mysteries. Despite a limp conclusion and amateurish writing (like a cross between the Hardy Boys and *Hollywood Babylon),* this somewhat sleazy fictionalization derives a built-in fascination from its star-studded cast of characters. Resist it if you can. I couldn't.

** Nicholas Brady: *Inside Job,* Leisure Books, $1.95. Having four laid-off cops knock over the NYPD property room is a terrific idea for a caper novel. Unfortunately, the writing is often inept, the robbery itself is given short shrift, and the result is a routine account of crime and punishment. (Brady writes of Orange County, California, like someone who has never been there.)

Among the reprints is an obscure mystery by the famed author of *The Once and Future King,* T. H. White. *Darkness at Pemberley* (Dover, $3.50), originally published in 1932, starts out as a deductive tale of the purest sort, but the duel of ex-Inspector Buller and the murderous Cambridge don Mauleverer soon turns into an action thriller more akin to Sax Rohmer's work. Did White start out to write one kind of mystery and decide midway to write another? Is his novel, as I choose to think, a parody of both types? A very odd item indeed, but a highly entertaining one.

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"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

DONALD E. WESTLAKE's "The Mulligan Stew"

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DIS-COUNTED PRICE
Ball, Brian	DEATH OF A LOW HANDICAP MAN	Walker	$8.95	$6.95
Barak, Michael	THE ENIGMA SACRIFICE	Morrow	8.95	6.95
Brett, Simon	AN AMATEUR CORPSE	Scribners	7.95	6.35
Burke, J. F.	CRAZY WOMAN BLUES	Dutton	7.95	6.35
Craig, Mary	WERE HE A STRANGER	Dodd, Mead	6.95	5.50
Egan, Leslie	LOOK BACK ON DEATH	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Egleton, Clive	THE MILLS BOMB	Atheneum	7.95	6.35
Ellerbeck, Rosemary	ROSE, ROSE, WHERE ARE YOU?	Coward, McCann & Geoghegan	8.95	6.95
Freemantle, Brian	HERE COMES CHARLIE M.	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Gosling, Paula	FAIR GAME	Coward, McCann & Geoghegan	8.95	6.95
Hansen, Joseph	THE MAN EVERYBODY WAS AFRAID OF	Holt, Rinehart	7.95	6.35
Hill, Peter	THE FANATICS	Scribners	7.95	6.35
Hubbard, P. M.	THE QUIET RIVER	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Knickmeyer, Steve	CRANMER	Random House	7.95	6.35
Kyle, Duncan	BLACK CAMELOT	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
MacDougall, James K.	DEATH AND THE MAIDEN	Bobbs-Merrill	8.95	6.95
MacKenzie, Donald	RAVEN SETTLES A SCORE	Houghton Mifflin	7.95	6.35
Marsh, Ngaio	GRAVE MISTAKE	Little, Brown	8.95	6.95
Melville-Ross, Antony	BLINDFOLD	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Nicholson, Michael	THE PARTRIDGE KITE	Holt, Rinehart	8.95	6.95
Poyer, Joe	THE CONTRACT	Atheneum	10.95	8.75
Queen, Ellery (ed.)	ELLERY QUEEN'S NAPOLEONS OF MYSTERY	Dial Press	8.95	6.95
Rendell, Ruth	A SLEEPING LIFE	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
St. James, Bernard	APRIL THIRTIETH	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Savage, Jenny	THE NEMESIS CLUB	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
Sinclair, Michael	THE MASTERPLAYERS	Norton	7.95	6.35
Tynan, Kathleen	AGATHA	Ballantine	7.95	6.35
Wainwright, John	THIEF OF TIME	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Waugh, Hillary	MADMAN AT MY DOOR	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Winslow, Pauline Glen	COPPER GOLD	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Woods, Sara	EXIT MURDERER	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35

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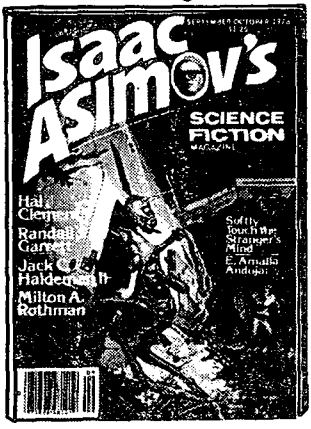

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a *NEW* L-and-L story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Lang, the art salesman, versus Daniell, the gallery owner and art auctioneer (with Lovell forging away in the background) engage in a subtle battle of wits to determine which one would settle for what he could get . . .

QUIT WHEN YOU'RE AHEAD

by *ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS*

Daniell carried the painting over to his office window where the light was better and studied it for several long minutes. "A very fine example of its type," he said at last. He was a tall spare man in his mid- to late-fifties with a pale thin-lipped face that seemed set in a permanent expression of petulant disapproval. Despite the frosty manner—or perhaps because of it—he was one of the most successful art auctioneers in the city. He was also, if my research was right, one of the least scrupulous.

"Although," he added waspishly, "late Nineteenth Century Romanticism isn't quite everyone's taste these days." He gave the painting one last look, then replaced it on its easel and came back to sit at his desk across from me. "The real question, though, Mr. Lang, is why you brought it to me. You have your own gallery. Why not offer it there?"

I smiled wryly. "If I could I would," I said. "The problem is that it's a forgery. It was painted less than six months ago by my partner."

Daniell's eyes flickered but otherwise his expression didn't change. "He does very good work," he said.

"He'd be the first to agree with you," I said. "Lovell has a very great if somewhat specialized talent. He's as nervous as six cats and a real nut about the food he eats. But on the plus side he can forge the work of any artist living or dead and do it so well that

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the original artist himself—assuming he ever got to see the painting—would be hard put to deny it was his, short of subjecting it to spectographic or electroluminescent analysis. The only problem is establishing the painting's provenance. And that's where you can help us. According to the paper, over the next month or so you're going to be auctioning off a number of paintings from several large collections. Nobody would really notice if one more—from a separate collection—was quietly slipped in."

Daniell regarded me dispassionately. "Perhaps not," he said. "But I don't know that it would work particularly to your advantage. To protect myself—leaving aside the moral and ethical considerations, of course, and assuming that I would agree to your suggestion in the first place—I would have to present your painting as a very fine but unfortunately unauthenticated work from an unpopular period. Under those circumstances I doubt very much that an auction would bring much more than you would get by offering it on the same basis yourself. People do overbid, but not that much."

"I realize that," I said. "On the other hand, it's not unusual, is it, for owners of paintings offered for auction to set a minimum price below which they won't sell?"

"No. In fact, it's fairly common. It's called a reserve."

"And," I went on, "as I understand it, the way the system works, the reserve is never announced at the sale or afterwards. Even if the painting is returned to the owner, the record only shows that it was knocked down for a certain price."

Daniell looked at me for another long moment, then nodded. "That's right," he said. "To protect the owner's interests."

"To maintain the price," I said. "But whatever the reason, the system provides an almost tailor-made solution to my problem. All I have to do is set a reserve high enough to make sure the painting won't sell. Then afterwards I have what I need—a legitimate record ostensibly establishing where the painting came from. Later I may have to sell for less than I supposedly paid, but"—I grinned—"sometimes there's an advantage to letting the other guy think he's getting the better of you."

Daniell didn't smile back. "Sometimes," he agreed. He was silent for a brief moment. "There is one problem, however," he said, "that you may have overlooked. You can't just set the reserve as high as you like. The auctioneer—ah—has a certain obligation to make sure that it isn't unduly out of line with the painting's true

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value. Since the one you have is a forgery—" He looked at me inquiringly.

I smiled. "Only you and I know that," I said. "And to keep it that way I'm willing to pay you considerably more than you'd make on a normal reserve transaction. $5000 to be exact." I took the check from my pocket and placed it on the desk between us. "In advance."

Daniell considered the check. "The girl will give you a receipt for your painting on the way out," he said at last. "Tell her the reserve we agreed on."

"Which is?"

"I'm sure you'll set a reasonable one," he said. He picked up the check.

Most people think of auctions as noisy affairs. Tobacco auctions may be. Art auctions are not. Bidding is usually by prearranged signal, which does make for a high degree of decorum. On the other hand, since the signals are generally recognized only by the auctioneer and his assistants, the bidder generally has no real idea whom he's bidding against—or even if he's bidding against anyone other than himself.

This was no exception. It was a week later—time enough for my check to clear—and Daniell had just knocked Lovell's forged Nineteenth Century Romantic down for its reserve price. As far as I could tell the one legitimate bidder had dropped off a good $3000 earlier, but Daniell had blandly continued to accept bids and counterbids for another ten minutes until finally he declared the painting sold and moved on to the next item in the catalogue.

Afterward, when the gallery had cleared, I went around to his office. He was at his desk fixing up the final sale records. Without looking up he said, "You don't believe in wasting time, do you, Mr. Lang? Come to reclaim your painting?"

"And deliver another," I said. I put the package I'd brought on the desk. Daniell looked at me curiously.

"As you say," I said, "I don't believe in wasting time."

"Obviously," Daniell said. He removed the wrapping and studied the painting inside. "You also go from one extreme to another. Italian. Early Seventeenth Century, I'd say at a guess."

"Late Sixteenth. Donato Delvecchio, to be precise."

Daniell looked back at the painting. "Perhaps," he said at last. "You'd have a better case if there were a signature—not to men-

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tion a tremendously more valuable painting. Or can't your friend do signatures?"

"Of course he can," I said. "But can you imagine a *signed* Delvecchio lying unrecognized all these years? Or not creating the kind of stir that would lead to all sorts of embarrassing questions if we tried to claim it had?" I shook my head. "No, thanks. I learned a long time ago it's better to settle for what you can get safely."

"Of course," Daniell said. "And how much do you think you can get?"

"I'm setting a reserve of $50,000," I said.

"As you wish. Our terms are the same as before, I presume."

"I don't see any reason to change. Do you?"

"None whatsoever." He turned back to his ledger. As I started to rise he added without looking back up, "It *was* payment in advance, wasn't it?"

I smiled wryly. "Yes, it was," I said. "Your check will be in the mail tonight."

Daniell nodded. "I'll look for it," he said.

Actually I had two envelopes to put in the mail that evening. One, as I had promised, contained a signed check made out to Daniell Galleries for $5000, the other a letter addressed to a Foster Richards in Huntington, New York, reporting that I had finally found the painting he had been searching for and expected to have it in my possession within a few days. Unfortunately, the painting was unsigned but since it matched exactly a work in progress described in a letter Delvecchio had written Archbishop Ponzi in 1569 there should be no difficulty proving its authenticity. What I wanted now, I wrote, was confirmation of the price agreed on—$150,000.

Daniell called me two days later. "Your check hasn't cleared yet," he said, "but I see no reason why we can't proceed with the auction anyway. Would this afternoon be convenient—or have you changed your mind about not wanting to waste time?"

"No. This afternoon's fine."

"Good. I'll see you at one then. Be prompt."

He rang off and I went down the hall to tell Lovell. Then, since I had less than half an hour to follow Daniell's advice and be prompt, I got my hat and went outside—and ran immediately into an old acquaintance from less prosperous days—Detective

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Sergeant Peterson from Fraud/Bunco.

His grin broadened when he saw me. "Well, well," he said, "just the man I was coming to see. Saves me the trouble of going inside and rousting you out."

"Some other time, Peterson, all right?" I said. "Normally I'd be overjoyed to let you harass me, but right now I happen to be in a hurry."

Peterson stopped smiling and put his hand on my chest. "Not any more you aren't," he said. "You're under arrest."

I stepped back and looked at him unbelievingly. "You can't be serious," I said. "What for?"

Peterson started to grin again. "Why, conspiracy to defraud," he said. "What else?"

We drove down to the police station in Peterson's car, Peterson and me in back, his partner up front behind the wheel.

"You know, Harry," Peterson said expansively once we were under way, "you guys never change, do you?"

"Some of us don't," I said.

"Yeah," Peterson said, "that's what I mean. Guys like you keep on thinking you're so much smarter and better than everybody else that you just can't quit when you're ahead. So sooner or later you always trip up and that's when I'm waiting." He looked at me almost wistfully. "To tell you the truth, though, I never thought you'd pull such a bonehead play as postdating a bum check."

"Neither did I," I said. "In fact, I never did."

"Sure," Peterson said. "Next thing you'll be telling me is that you never heard of a woman named Natalie Warwick."

"You guessed it."

"Yeah? The trouble is Mrs. Warwick says different. She says you bought a couple of pictures from her, paying her with a postdated check so you could have time to transfer funds from one account to another. Only she says when she went to the bank after the check came due you didn't even have an account there. And you know what? I believe her over you. But if you want to do it the hard way, okay. We'll have her come down and pick you out of a lineup. How's that sound?"

"Like a very interesting experience," I said.

When we got to the station they put me in a small room furnished with a wooden table and two chairs and left me alone. Around two o'clock a uniformed officer brought me a cup of

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lukewarm vending-machine coffee. It was pretty bad and I left most of it. Finally, shortly after four, Peterson came back, accompanied by a taller, older man, and told me I could go.

"Just like that," I said.

"Just like that," Peterson said. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"You pull me off the street," I said. "You make me miss an important business appointment, not to mention the embarrassment, and then—"

"Ah, Mr. Lang," the older man said. "I'm Lieutenant Driscoll." He tried to smile reassuringly. "And it—ah—appears that you—and the police department—have been the victims of a particularly cruel practical joke. As Sergeant Peterson informed you, a woman identifying herself as Natalie Warwick did file a complaint against you and—ah—obviously, you know, we had to act on it. Unfortunately, when we attempted subsequently to contact her at the address she gave—"

"Nobody knew anything about her," I said.

"It was a vacant lot," Driscoll admitted unhappily.

"It's a pity," I said, "Peterson here was in such a hurry to pin something on me that he couldn't have checked that out first."

"It won't happen again," Driscoll said.

"I hope not," I said. "I'd hate to have to bring a suit for false arrest."

Driscoll looked at Peterson and Peterson looked very unhappy.

Driscoll offered to have a car take me back to where I'd been picked up. I turned him down and caught a cab to Daniell's gallery. It was close to five when I got there and it was empty except for Daniell working alone in his office.

"I expected you earlier," he said.

"I expected me earlier too," I said. "But you know how it is with the best laid plans."

"Yes," Daniell said drily. "I was somewhat at a loss," he added, "when you failed to show up on time. However, since I had advertised the sale it seemed best to proceed rather than risk comment by calling it off at the last moment."

"I agree;" I said.

"Do you? Good, I'm glad. I'm afraid I have to advise you, though, that there was a legitimate bidder for your Delvecchio." His eyes met mine blandly. "He exceeded your stated reserve by $500."

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Daniell looked down and picked up an envelope. "In your absence and without instructions covering such an eventuality I again had no choice but to do as I thought best." He handed me the envelope. Inside was a certified check for $45,500. "I allowed the sale," Daniell said. "That represents the proceeds—less, of course, my fee."

"Your fee was paid in advance," I said.

His eyes flicked away. "Your earlier check will be returned to you," he said.

"Sure," I said, "but we'll argue about that later. Right now the question is how do I get in touch with the buyer."

Daniell sighed. "I was afraid that would be your reaction," he said. "I'd advise against it, but if you persist I imagine a resale could be arranged—for $150,000."

For the second time that day I found myself staring at someone unbelievingly and saying the same words I'd used before: "You can't be serious."

"Why not?" Daniell said. "Isn't that the price you quoted Foster Richards?"

"How do you know about Richards?"

"You told me," Daniell said. He smiled, a brief, bleak movement of the lips. "Yesterday in the mail instead of a check I received a very interesting letter. It wasn't addressed to me, but I'm afraid I read it anyway." He looked at me mockingly. "You see what happens when you get in too much of a hurry, Mr. Lang. You make mistakes. In any case, Mr. Richards is well known as a collector and I took the liberty of calling him. He's out of the country for the rest of the month, but I was able to speak to his secretary. I'm afraid I identified myself as you, explained that there had been an apparent mixup, and asked if Mr. Richards had received a check intended for Daniell Galleries. He confirmed that Mr. Richards had." Daniell smiled again. "I assumed you'd stop payment on it as soon as you realized what had happened. So I told him to return it to you. You should have it in a matter of days."

"Sure," I said. "And that's why you moved the auction up. To have everything settled before that check came back. You even set me up with the police so I couldn't be here to stop you, didn't you?"

Daniell shrugged. "And if I did? Would you have acted differently in my place? I think not. In any case, I'm afraid it's a little late now for you to do anything about it except—how did you

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phrase it—'settle for what you can get.' And now"—he picked up his pen—"if you'll excuse me I do have this to finish. Unless, of course, you're still interested in buying the painting back."

"No," I said. I put the envelope and check in my pocket and left.

Once I was outside I started to grin. I wondered how Daniell would feel when Richards didn't rise to his bait, because, of course, there was no letter from Delvecchio describing a work in progress anything like the one Lovell had painted. For that matter, the check and letter hadn't been placed in the wrong envelopes by mistake either. So all in all, it looked as if Daniell was going to be the one who was going to have to settle for what he could get; and it wouldn't be all that much, since by the time he found out what happened, his check would have long since been cashed and the money put where it would do the most good—for Lang and Lovell.

"O"

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When Maigret "took up his favorite attitude in which Headquarters at the Quai des Orfèvres had so often seen him, pipe between his teeth, hands clasped behind his back, with that indefinable air of stubbornness that he assumed when apparently unrelated facts began to group themselves in his mind and form, as it were, a still unsubstantial germ of truth"—at that moment the murder investigation really began . . .

STORM IN THE CHANNEL

by GEORGES SIMENON

It looked as if fate had taken advantage of Maigret's recent retirement to confront him, ironically, with the most glaring proof of the unreliability of human evidence. And this time the famous detective was on the wrong side of the counter, so to speak, facing a policeman's searching gaze and being asked the question: "Are you sure it was half-past six, or a little earlier, and that you were sitting beside the fire?"

Now Maigret realized with appalling clarity how a small handful of human beings, half a dozen in this case, were suddenly going to be paralyzed by this simple question: "What exactly were you doing between six and seven o'clock?"

If only it had been a question of disorderly, or dramatic, or tragic incidents! But it was nothing of the sort; merely a matter of half a dozen people hanging about, waiting for dinner on a wet night in the two or three public sitting rooms of a boardinghouse!

And Maigret, when he was questioned, hesitated like a forgetful schoolboy or a false witness.

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"A wet night" is putting it mildly. At the Gare Saint-Lazare there had been a notice: *Storm in the Channel. The Dieppe-Newhaven crossing may be delayed.*

And a good many English travelers turned around and went back to their hotels.

At Dieppe, in the main street, it looked as if the wind would tear down the street signs. You had to lean against the street doors to open them. The water came down in bucketfuls, with a noise like waves crashing on shingle. Sometimes a figure would dart past, someone who had to go out, clinging close to the walls, his head covered with a coat.

It was November. The lights had had to be put on at four o'clock. At the harbor station the boat which should have left at two lay alongside the fishing smacks whose masts were clashing.

Madame Maigret had resignedly fetched from her room a piece of knitting which she had started on the train. She was sitting close to the stove, while an unfamiliar ginger cat, the boarding-house cat, had come to nestle in her lap.

From time to time she raised her head and cast a woebegone glance at Maigret, who was wandering about like a lost soul.

"We ought to have gone to the hotel," she sighed. "You'd have found someone there to play cards with."

Obviously! But Madame Maigret, ever thrifty, had got from some friend or other the address of this god-forsaken boarding-house at the end of the quay, amid the gloomy desolation of the summer-visitors district, where in winter all the shutters were closed and all the doors barred.

And yet this was supposed to be a holiday trip, the first, really, that the pair of them had taken since their honeymoon.

Maigret was free at last! He had left the Quai des Orfèvres and he could go to bed at night secure in the knowledge that he would not be disturbed by a telephone call summoning him to examine a corpse that was not yet cold.

And so, as Madame Maigret had long wanted to visit England, he had made up his mind. "We'll go and spend a fortnight in London. I'll take the opportunity to look up some of my colleagues at Scotland Yard with whom I worked during the war."

Just their luck! A storm in the Channel, the boat delayed, and this gloomy boardinghouse, remembered on the spur of the moment by Madame Maigret, its very walls exuding meanness and boredom.

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The landlady, Mademoiselle Otard, was a spinster of 50 who tried to disguise her sourness behind honeyed smiles. Her nostrils twitched involuntarily every time she came across the trail of tobacco smoke that followed Maigret in his wanderings to and fro. Several times she had been on the point of saying that it was not the thing to smoke a pipe incessantly in small overheated rooms where ladies were sitting. On these occasions Maigret, feeling a row imminent, looked her in the eyes so calmly that she preferred to turn her head away.

She was equally disgusted when she saw the Inspector, who had never been able to break himself of the habit, hovering about the stoves, then seizing the poker and raking the coal so energetically that the chimneys roared like furnaces.

The house was not a large one. It was a two-story villa converted into a boardinghouse. There was a passage by way of entrance hall, but for economy's sake it was rarely lighted, nor was the staircase leading to the first and second floors, so that every now and then you would hear people stumbling up the stairs, or a hand groping for the doorknob.

The front room served as a lounge, with funny light armchairs of greenish velvet and tattered old magazines on the table. Then there was the dining room, where guests were also allowed to sit except at meal-times.

Madame Maigret was in the lounge. Maigret wandered from one room to the other, from one stove to the other, from one poker to the other.

At the back was the pantry where Irma, the fifteen-year-old maid, was busy that afternoon cleaning knives and plate with silver polish.

And finally there was the kitchen, the domain of Mademoiselle Otard and of Jeanne, the older of the two maids, a slattern in her late twenties, perpetually slipshod, unkempt and of dubious cleanliness, and moreover perpetually embittered, looking about her resentfully and suspiciously.

The only other member of the household was a bewildered little boy of four who was always being pushed around, scolded and slapped: Jeanne's son, as Maigret learned by questioning the younger servant.

Elsewhere, in such weather, time might not have passed very cheerfully. Here it dragged funereally, and there must have been far more seconds to the minute here than anywhere else, for the

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hands seemed not to move at all on the face of the black marble clock standing under its glass case on the mantelpiece.

"Try to take advantage of a lull to go to the café. You're bound to find someone there to have a game with," suggested Madame Maigret.

One couldn't even have a quiet chat in the place, for there was always somebody about. Mademoiselle Otard bustled from kitchen to lounge, opening drawers or closets, sitting down, going off again as if she had to keep an eye on everyone or a disaster would happen. As though if she stayed away for a quarter of an hour somebody would take the opportunity to pinch her old copies of *La Mode du Jour* or set fire to the sideboard.

From time to time Irma came in too, to put away knives, spoons, and forks in that same sideboard and take others out.

As for the sad lady, as the Maigrets called her because they did not know her name, she sat bolt upright on a chair beside the dining-room stove, reading a book whose title could not be seen because the book had lost its cover.

As far as they could discover, she had been there for several weeks. She seemed to be about 30, and in poor health; perhaps she had come to convalesce after some operation? At any rate she moved about with the utmost caution, as if she were afraid of damaging herself. She ate little, and always sighed as she ate, doubtless regretting the minutes wasted in such a vulgar activity.

As for the other lady, the young bride as Maigret called her with a sardonic smile, she was quite the reverse, and she was forever making a draft as she swept from one armchair to another.

The "young bride" was probably in her early forties. She was short and stout and definitely not easy-going; the proof was that her husband came hurrying up at her slightest summons, assuming beforehand an obedient, sheepish air.

This husband was about 30, and it was obvious from a glance that he had not married for love but had sacrificed his freedom in order to insure for himself a comfortable old age.

Their name was Mosselet—Jules and Emilie Mosselet.

Though the clock hands did not move fast, they must have moved a bit, for Maigret remembered afterward having looked at the time when Jeanne brought the sad lady a peppermint tisane; it was a few minutes past five, and Jeanne was looking surlier than ever.

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It was shortly after this that the young Englishman, Mr. John, came in from outside, letting the cold wind and the rain into the house and bringing trickles of water into the lounge off his dripping raincoat.

He looked flushed with the keen air and the news he was bringing. He announced in a strong English accent: "The boat's going to sail. My luggage can be taken out, Mademoiselle."

He had been restless ever since the morning, for he was eager to get back to England, and now he had just come from the harbor station where he had learned that the Channel steamer was going to attempt the crossing. "Have you got my bill ready?"

Maigret hesitated for a moment. He was on the point of following his wife's advice, at the risk of a soaking, and running down the street as far as the Brasserie des Suisses, where at least there would be some life and activity.

He even went as far as the coat-stand in the hall, and noticed in the semidarkness the Englishman's three big suitcases. Then he shrugged and went into the lounge.

"Why don't you go? You're just getting irritable unnecessarily," said Madame Maigret.

This remark was enough to make him subside heavily into an armchair, pick up the first magazine he saw, and begin to turn over its pages.

The remarkable thing was that he had strictly nothing to do and nothing to preoccupy him. Logically he should have been in a state of perfect relaxation.

The house was not large. From any point in it you could hear the slightest sounds; in fact in the evening, when the Mosselet couple retired to their bedroom, it became quite embarrassing.

But Maigret saw nothing, heard nothing, had not the faintest presentiment.

He was vaguely aware of Mr. John paying his bill and going into the pantry to tip Irma. He made some vague reply to the Englishman's vague goodbye and realized that Jeanne, being heftier than the young man, was going to carry two of the cases to the boat.

But he did not see her go. It didn't interest him. He happened to be reading a long article in tiny print on the habits of field mice—the magazine he had picked up at random being an agricultural journal—and he had ended up by becoming absurdly fascinated by it.

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After that the minute hand could creep forward on the gray-green clock face without anybody noticing. Madame Maigret, counting the stitches in her knitting, was moving her lips in silence. From time to time a lump of coal crackled in one of the stoves or a gust of wind howled in the chimney.

The clink of china indicated that Irma was setting the table. There was a vague smell of frying that heralded the traditional evening dish of whiting.

And suddenly voices rang out in the night, excited voices that seemed to spring from the storm itself and that drew nearer, sounded right up against the shutters, stopped at the door and were brought to a noisy close by the most violent ring of the bell ever heard in that house.

Even then Maigret did not give a start. For hours he had been longing for a break in the day's monotony. Now that it had come, far more sensational than anything he could have expected, he sat absorbed in stories about field mice.

"Yes, this is the house . . ." Mademoiselle Otard's voice was heard saying.

She ushered in air and wetness and damp clothes, and red excited faces. Maigret was obliged to raise his head. He caught sight of a policeman's uniform and the black overcoat of a little man with an unlighted cigar in his mouth.

"I think this is where a certain Jeanne Fénard was in service?" said the man with the cigar.

Maigret noticed that the little boy was there, having crept in from heaven knows where, probably from the depths of the kitchen.

"She has just been shot dead with a revolver as she was going along the Rue de la Digue."

Mademoiselle Otard's immediate reaction was one of incredulity and suspicion. She was patently not the sort of person to be taken in easily and, tight-lipped, she let fall the magnificent comment: "Really?"

But the sequel left her in no doubt, for the man with the unlighted cigar went on, "I am the police inspector. I want you to come with me to identify the body . . . And I want nobody else to leave the house."

Maigret's eyes were twinkling mischievously. His wife looked at him as if to say, "Why don't you tell them who you are?"

But Maigret had retired such a short time ago that he was still

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savoring the delights of anonymity. He sank back into his armchair with real enjoyment. He scrutinized the inspector with a critical eye.

"Kindly put on your coat and follow me."

"Where to?" Mademoiselle Otard protested again.

"To the morgue."

There followed loud screams, a genuine or else a well-simulated fit of hysterics, with a moan from the sad lady visitor, whom Maigret had forgotten.

Irma darted from her pantry, holding a plate in her hand.

"Is Jeanne dead?"

"It's none of your business," declared Mademoiselle Otard. "I shall be back presently. You can serve dinner in the meantime."

She glanced at the little boy, who had not understood what was going on and was wandering about among the legs of grownups.

"Shut him up in his room . . . Put him to bed."

Where was Madame Mosselet at that moment? The question would seem an easy one and yet Maigret couldn't have answered it. On the other hand Mosselet, who wore ridiculous red felt slippers indoors, was standing there somewhere near the hall. He must have heard the noise from his room and come down.

"What's happening?" he asked.

But the local inspector was in a hurry. He said a few words in a whisper to the uniformed policeman, who took off his cape and cap and settled down by the fire, like someone who has come to stay.

Meanwhile Mademoiselle Otard was being hurried out, wearing a yellow waterproof coat and rubber boots. She turned round once more to call out to Irma: "Hurry up and serve dinner! The fish'll be burnt!"

Irma was weeping mechanically, as though out of politeness, because somebody had died. She wept as she handed round the dishes, turning her head away so that her tears should not fall into the food.

Here, Maigret noticed that Madame Mosselet was at the table, showing no other emotion than curiosity.

"I wonder how it can have happened . . . Was it in the street? . . . Are there gangsters in Dieppe?"

Maigret was eating hungrily. Madame Maigret could not understand how her husband could seem so uninterested in this af-

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fair, when his whole life had been spent investigating crimes.

The sad lady was staring at her whiting and the whiting was staring back at her. From time to time she opened her mouth, not to eat but to breathe out a little air by way of a sigh.

As for the policeman, he had taken a chair and was sitting astride it, watching the others eat and longing for a chance to show off.

"It was I that found her," he said with pride to Madame Mosselet, who seemed the most interested.

"How?"

"Quite by chance . . . I live in the Rue de la Digue, a little street that runs from the quay to the far end of the harbor, beyond the tobacco factory. That's as good as saying that nobody ever goes down it. I was walking fast with my head bent and I saw something dark—"

"How dreadful!" said Madame Mosselet, without conviction.

"At first I thought it might be a drunk, for there's always some of them lying about the pavement—"

"Even in winter?"

"Particularly in winter, because people begin drinking to get warm—"

"While in summer they drink to get cool!" Jules Mosselet said jokingly, with a sly glance at his wife.

"That's about it. I touched the body. I found it was a woman. I called for help, and when she had been carried into a pharmacy, the one on the corner of the Rue de Paris, we saw that she was dead. And that was when I recognized her, because I know all the faces in the neighborhood. I told the Chief: 'That's the maid from the Pension Otard.' "

Then Maigret inquired hesitantly, as if reluctant to interfere in what did not concern him: "Were there any suitcases beside her?"

"Why should there have been suitcases?"

"I don't know . . . I wonder, too, if she was facing towards the harbor or in this direction."

The policeman scratched his head.

"Wait a minute. I believe, the way she was lying, she must have been coming this way when it happened."

He hesitated a moment, then made up his mind to take hold of the bottle of red wine and pour himself a glass, murmuring, "May I?"

This action had brought him close to the table. There were still

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two whiting lying flat on the dish. He hesitated once more, took one of them, ate it without knife or fork, and went over to throw the spine into the coal scuttle.

Then he looked questioningly round the table, made sure that nobody wanted the second whiting and ate it like the first, took another drink and sighed: "It must have been a crime of passion. That girl was a really fast one. She was always hanging around the dance hall at the far end of the harbor."

"Well, that makes it different," murmured Madame Mosselet, who seemed to think that if passion was involved the whole thing was quite natural.

"What surprises me," went on the policeman, while Maigret never took his eyes off him, "is that it was done with a gun. Sailors, you know, are more likely to use knives."

At that moment Mademoiselle Otard reappeared, and the wind, which had given a flush to other people's faces, had made hers pale. The incident, moreover, had given her a sense of her own importance, and her whole attitude proclaimed: "I know certain things, but don't expect me to tell you. . . ."

Her glance swept round the table, the diners and their plates, taking stock of the fishbones. She said severely to Irma, who stood glued to the doorway, sniveling, "Why don't you get on with serving the veal?"

Finally she turned to the policeman: "I hope they've given you something to drink? Your chief will be here in a few minutes. He's telephoning to Newhaven."

Maigret gave a start and she noticed it. It struck her as odd, and an obvious look of suspicion crossed her face. Consequently she felt bound to add, "At least I suppose so."

She did not suppose so; she knew. So the local inspector had heard about Mr. John and his hurried departure.

For the time being, then, the official line followed the trail of the young Englishman.

"All this is going to make me ill again!" the sad lady murmured plaintively. She opened her lips scarcely three times a day except to sigh.

"And what about me?" asked Mademoiselle Otard indignantly, for she could not endure that anyone else should be more affected by the event than herself. "You think this is going to be convenient for me? A girl I spent months training after a fashion . . . Irma! When are you going to bring that gravy?"

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The most obvious result of these comings and goings was to let wafts of cold air into the house; instead of merging in the surrounding warmth, it formed little fluttering drafts that crept round the back of the neck and aroused a shiver between the shoulder blades.

So much so that Maigret got up and, disregarding the empty coal scuttle, went to poke the stove. Then he filled his pipe, lit it with a paper spill held close to the flame, and automatically took up his favorite attitude, in which Headquarters at the Quai des Orfèvres had so often seen him, pipe between his teeth, hands clasped behind his back, with that indefinable air of stubbornness that he assumed when apparently unrelated facts began to group themselves in his mind and form, as it were, a still unsubstantial germ of truth.

The arrival of the Dieppe Inspector did not rouse him from his immobility. He heard: "The boat hasn't got there yet . . . They're going to let me know . . ."

And one could readily imagine the steamer tossed in the darkness of the Channel, where nothing could be seen but the pale crests of huge waves. And the seasick passengers, the deserted buffet, anxious shadows on the darkened deck, with no other guide than the flash of the Newhaven lighthouse.

"I shall be obliged to question all these ladies and gentlemen in turn," said the Inspector.

Mademoiselle Otard understood, and decided: "We can shut the communicating doors. You can sit in the lounge and . . ."

The Inspector had had no dinner, but there were no more whiting left on the table and he did not like to thrust his fingers into the dish where slices of veal were congealing.

It happened by chance. The policeman had looked round to decide whom he should begin with. His glance had met that of Madame Maigret, who seemed calm enough to set an example.

"Come in," he had said to her, opening the door of the lounge and then closing it behind her, while a faint smile flitted across the lips of her husband.

Although the door was shut you could hear practically everything that was being said on the other side, and Maigret's smile grew more marked when his colleague in the next room asked, "Spelled *ai* or *é*?"

"*Ai*."

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"Like the famous detective?"

And the admirable wife merely replied, "Yes!"

"You're not related to him?"

"I'm his wife."

"But then in that case . . . It's your husband who's here with you?"

And a minute later Maigret was in the lounge, facing the little fellow who looked radiant and at the same time a trifle anxious.

"Now admit that you were trying to have me on! . . . When I think that I was going to question you like all the rest . . . I must point out that what I'm doing now is just to carry out normal procedure and also in a way to kill time till I get news from Newhaven . . . But you were on the spot. You must have seen the whole thing coming in a way—surely you've got more definite ideas and I'd be grateful if you—"

"I assure you that I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, who knew that the murdered girl was going out?"

"The people in the house, of course. But this is where I realize how hard it is to be a witness; I'm quite incapable of stating definitely who was in the house at that moment."

"You were busy?"

"I was reading. I was vaguely aware of noise and bustle. Then—"

"Madame Mosselet, for instance! Was she downstairs or wasn't she? And if she was, which room was she in? What was she doing?"

The Dieppe Inspector was not satisfied. He was almost convinced that his illustrious colleague was enjoying letting him struggle on his own, and no doubt he promised himself secretly to show Maigret how he, a provincial detective, could conduct an inquiry.

The sad lady was sent for; her name was Germaine Moulineau and she was a schoolteacher on convalescent leave.

"I was in the dining room," she mumbled. "I remember thinking it was unfair to let that poor girl carry the Englishman's cases when there were strong men sitting about killing time."

This was aimed at Maigret, as was proved by the glance she cast at his broad shoulders when she referred to "strong men".

"After that you didn't leave the dining room?"

"I went up to my bedroom."

"Did you stay there long?"

"About a quarter of an hour. I took a tablet and waited for it to take effect."

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"Forgive the question I'm going to ask you, but I'm asking all the guests in the house the same thing and I consider it a mere formality. I suppose you have not been out today, so that your clothes must be dry?"

"No. About the middle of the afternoon I went out for a moment."

Yet another proof of the unreliability of evidence! Maigret had not noticed that she had gone out, nor that she had left the dining room for a quarter of an hour.

"Perhaps you went to the chemist's to fetch your tablets?"

"No. I wanted to look at the harbor in the wind and rain."

"Thank you . . . Next, please!"

The next was Irma, the young maid, still sniffling and crumpling the corner of her apron between her fingers.

"Do you know if your friend Jeanne had any enemies?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Had you noticed any change in her behavior, suggesting that she was afraid because of some threat?"

"Only that she told me this morning she wasn't going to stick in this hole much longer. That's what she said."

"You're not treated well here?"

"I didn't say that," Irma declared hastily, with a glance at the door.

"Well, then, do you know if Jeanne had any lovers?"

"She must have had."

"Why d'you say she must have had?"

"Because she was always afraid of having a baby."

"Do you know any of their names?"

"There was one fisherman who sometimes came and whistled in the alley, a chap called Gustave."

"What alley's that?"

"The alley behind the house. You can get out that way, across the courtyard behind the kitchen."

"Did you go out this evening?"

She hesitated, nearly said no, hesitated again and then admitted: "Just for a second. I went to the baker's to get a croissant."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. I suppose about five."

"Why did you have to get a croissant?"

"We don't get a lot to eat," she muttered in a barely audible voice.

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"Thank you."

"You won't tell on me?"

"You needn't worry . . . Next, please! . . ."

This time Jules Mosselet made his appearance, looking completely self-possessed.

"All yours, Inspector!"

"Did you go out this afternoon?"

"Yes, Inspector. I went to get some cigarettes."

"At what time?"

"It must have been five or ten minutes to five. I came back almost immediately. The weather was shocking."

"You didn't know the dead woman?"

"I didn't know her at all, Inspector."

He was thanked, as the others had been, and his wife took his place and was asked the question that had now become a ritual: "Did you go out this afternoon?"

"I suppose I've got to answer?"

"You'd be well advised to do so."

"In that case I only beg you not to mention it to Jules. You'll see why. He's very attractive to women and because he's a weak character, I don't trust him. When I heard him go out I followed him to find out where he was going."

"And where did he go?" asked the Inspector, with a wink at Maigret.

The answer was somewhat unexpected.

"I don't know."

"What d'you mean, you don't know? You've just admitted that you followed him."

"That's just it! I thought I was following him. Don't you understand? By the time I had put on my coat and opened my umbrella he had already got to the corner of the first street. And when I got there myself I saw a figure in a brown raincoat in the distance and I followed. It wasn't until five minutes later, when the person went past a lighted shop window, that I realized it wasn't Jules. So I came back and behaved as if nothing had happened."

"How long after you did he come back?"

"I don't know. I was upstairs. He may have stayed downstairs for a while."

Just then there was a sharp ring of the bell and a policeman in uniform handed a note to the Inspector, who opened it and presently handed it over to Maigret:

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Nobody answering to the name or description of John Miller landed from the Dieppe boat at Newhaven.

The police Inspector had politely invited Maigret to accompany him on his investigation if he was interested, but did not seem particularly enthusiastic, in view of his colleague's apparently unhelpful attitude.

However, as they walked together along the street, in constant danger of tiles falling on their heads—there were broken pieces lying here and there on the pavements—he explained to Maigret:

"I don't want to leave anything to chance, as you'll have noticed. I shall be very surprised if there isn't something fishy about that John Miller. The landlady tells me he had been at her *pension* for several days, but that he had never given anything but evasive answers to her questions. He paid his bill in French money and—this is interesting—with an unusual quantity of small change. He went out very seldom, and only in the mornings. On two consecutive days Mademoiselle Otard met him in the market place, taking an apparent interest in butter, eggs and vegetables."

"Or perhaps in the housewives' purses," cut in Maigret.

"You think he's a pickpocket?"

"At any rate, that would explain how he might have got into England under a different name and in different clothes from those you had described to the English authorities."

"That won't stop me from keeping on trying to get hold of him. And now we're going to Victor's, the café close to the fish market. I should like to meet that Gustave the little maid told us about, and to know whether he's the same as a certain Gustave Broken-Tooth with whom I've had a lot of dealings."

"According to your man, the men hereabouts use knives rather than guns," Maigret objected, as he jumped over a deep puddle of water and got splashed nonetheless.

A few minutes later they went into Victor's, where the floor was thick with grease and a dozen or so tables were occupied by sailors in jerseys and clogs. The café was glaringly lit, and a jukebox was dispensing shrill music, while the proprietor and two slovenly waitresses bustled about.

It was obvious from the men's glances that they had recognized the local Inspector, who went to sit with Maigret in a corner and ordered a beer. When one of the girls served him, he caught hold

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of her apron and asked her in a low voice, "What time did Jeanne come in this afternoon?"

"What Jeanne?"

"Gustave's girl."

The waitress hesitated, glanced at one of the groups of men, and then pondered. "I don't think I saw her," she said at last.

"She often comes, doesn't she?"

"Sometimes. But she doesn't come in. She opens the door a crack to see if he's there and, if he is, he goes to join her outside."

"Did Gustave spend the evening here?"

"You'll have to ask my friend Berthe. I had to go out."

Maigret was smiling to himself. He seemed delighted to find that he was not the only person who could not provide definite evidence.

Berthe was the other waitress. She squinted; possibly that was what gave her such a disagreeable air.

"If you want to know," she told the Inspector, "you'll have to ask him yourself. I'm not paid to do police work."

By now the first waitress had already spoken to a red-headed fellow in rubber boots, who stood up, hitched up his duck trousers, which were fastened with a piece of string, spat on the floor, walked up to the Inspector and, when he opened his mouth, revealed a broken tooth right in the middle.

"Is it me you're talking about?"

"I want to know whether you've seen Jeanne this evening."

"What's it got to do with you?"

"Jeanne is dead."

"It's not true."

"I tell you she's dead. She was shot dead in the street."

The man was genuinely surprised. He looked round at the others and shouted, "Here, what's all this about? Is Jeanne really dead?"

"Answer my question. Did you see her?"

"Oh, well, can't be helped. I'd sooner tell the truth. She came here—"

"At what time?"

"I don't know. I was playing for drinks with Big Joe."

"Was it after five?"

"Must have been."

"Did she come in?"

"I don't allow her to come into the cafés I go to. I saw her face

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in the doorway. I went and told her to leave me alone."

"Why?"

"Because!"

The proprietor had stopped the jukebox and silence reigned in the room. The other customers were trying to overhear snatches of the conversation.

"Had you been quarreling?"

Broken-Tooth shrugged, like someone who knows he's going to have a hard time making himself understood.

"We had and we hadn't."

"Explain yourself."

"Let's say that I had my eye on another girl and she was jealous."

"What other girl?"

"One who came to the dance hall with Jeanne once."

"What's her name?"

"I don't even know it. Well, can't be helped, if you really want to know. I've never even touched her, so I can't get into trouble for that, in spite of her age. It's the kid that works at the boardinghouse with Jeanne . . . That's all! When Jeanne came, I just went outside and told her that if she didn't leave me alone I'd hit her."

"And after that? You went straight back into the café?"

"Not right away. I went to watch the Newhaven boat leaving. I thought it might get into difficulties on account of the current . . . Are you going to arrest me?"

"Not yet."

"You needn't stand on ceremony, you know. We're getting used to always taking the rap for other people . . . And so Jeanne's dead! I hope she didn't suffer?"

It was a strange sensation, for Maigret, to be here and to have nothing to do. He was not used to being merely a member of the public. He heard a voice that was not his own asking the questions, and he had to make an effort not to break in, approving or disapproving.

Sometimes a question was on the tip of his tongue and it was a real torment to have to keep silent.

"Are you coming along?" the Inspector asked Maigret, as he stood up and laid some money on the table.

"Where are you going?"

"To the police station. I've got to make out my report. Af-

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terwards, I might as well go to bed. There's nothing more I can do today."

Out on the pavement, however, he murmured as he turned up the collar of his overcoat: "Of course I shall put a man on to tail Broken-Tooth. That's my method, and I think it used to be yours too . . . It's a mistake to try to get immediate results at all costs; one only gets tired and flustered. Tomorrow I shall have to deal with the Public Prosecutor's lot."

Maigret chose to part company with him under the red light at the police station. There was nothing for him to do in the office where his colleague was going to settle down quietly to writing a meticulous report.

The wind had dropped a little, but the rain was still falling, seeming even wetter because it was falling vertically. Few people were passing in front of the shop windows, which were still lighted up.

As he always used to do when a case was starting badly, Maigret began by wasting time. He went to the Brasserie des Suisses and spent a quarter of an hour uninterestedly watching a game of backgammon at the next table.

His shoes had let in water and he felt he was catching a cold. That decided him, after finishing his glass of beer, to order a rum toddy that sent the blood racing to his head.

"Oh, well," he sighed as he got up.

Out of doors, at the end of the quay beyond the harbor station, which was deserted and lit only by a single arclamp, Maigret caught sight of a blur of violet light on the wet pavement and remembered a certain dance hall that had been mentioned.

Without having really made up his mind to go there, and although he was still resolved to keep out of this business, he found himself in front of a garish façade, vulgarly painted and lit by colored lamps. When he opened the door a waft of dance music hit him, but he was disappointed to find the place almost empty.

Two women were dancing together, two working girls probably, out to get their money's worth, and the three musicians were playing for them alone.

"By the way, what day is it?" he asked the proprietor as he sat down at the bar.

"Monday. Today, of course, we won't get a big crowd. Here, it's chiefly Saturdays and Sundays, and a bit on Thursdays. There'll be a few couples presently, when the cinema shuts down, al-

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though in this weather . . . What'll you drink?"

"A toddy."

Maigret regretted his choice on seeing his toddy concocted from an unknown brand of rum and water boiled in a dubious-looking kettle.

"You haven't been here before, have you? Are you passing through Dieppe?"

"Just passing through, yes."

And the man, misinterpreting his intentions, explained: "You know, you won't find anything of that kind here. You can dance with these young ladies and offer them a drink, but as for anything else, well . . . Specially today!"

"Because there's nobody here?"

"Not only that . . . Look, you see those kids dancing? D'you know why they're dancing?"

"No."

"To get rid of the blues. A little while ago one of them was crying and the other sat staring straight in front of her. I stood them a drink to cheer them up. It's not very pleasant to hear suddenly that one of your friends has been killed . . ."

"Oh, has there been an accident?"

"There's been a crime! In a little street not a hundred metres from here. A servant girl was picked up with a bullet in her head."

And Maigret reflected: "And it never occurred to me to ask if she'd been shot in the head or in the chest!"

Then he said aloud, "So the shot was fired at close quarters?"

"Very close, I'd say. In this darkness and in such stormy weather it would have been hard to aim from as much as three steps away. All the same I'll bet it wasn't a local man. They're ready enough with their fists, of course. Every Saturday I have to chuck somebody out before they get to fighting. Look, ever since I heard about it I haven't felt quite myself."

He poured himself a little drink, and smacked his lips.

"Would you like me to introduce you?"

Maigret did not refuse quickly enough, and the proprietor had already summoned the two girls with a friendly wave.

"This gentleman's feeling lonely and would like to offer you a drink. Come over here. You'll be more comfortable in this corner."

He winked at Maigret, as though authorizing him to take a few liberties unseen.

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"What shall I bring you? Hot toddies?"

"That'll do."

It was awkward. Maigret couldn't think how to handle this. The two girls were scrutinizing him stealthily and trying to make conversation.

"Won't you dance?"

"I can't dance."

"Wouldn't you like us to teach you?"

No! There were limits, after all! He couldn't see himself gliding about the floor under the amused gaze of the three-man band.

"Are you a commercial traveler?"

"Yes. I'm just passing through. The boss has just told me that your friend—I mean, that there's been a tragedy."

"She wasn't a friend of ours!" retorted one of the girls.

"Oh? I understood—"

"If she'd been a friend of ours we shouldn't be here! But we knew her, same as we know all the girls that come here. Now she's dead we don't want to say anything against her. It's quite sad enough without that."

"Of course."

He had to agree with them. Above all he had to wait patiently without scaring his companions.

"Was she not very respectable?" he ventured at last.

"That's putting it mildly."

"Shut up, Marie! Now she's dead . . ."

A few customers appeared. One of the girls danced several times with strangers. Then Maigret caught sight of Gustave Broken-Tooth, dead drunk, leaning against the bar.

The drunken man stared at Maigret as though he were on the point of recognizing him, and Maigret anticipated an unpleasant scene. But nothing happened. The man was too tipsy to see anything clearly and the proprietor was only waiting for a chance to throw him out.

In exchange for the favor he had done Maigret by introducing him to a couple of local beauties, he expected him to stand a round of toddies every quarter of an hour.

Consequently when Maigret left the place at one o'clock in the morning, he lurched through the doorway, had some difficulty in fastening his overcoat, and splashed in all the puddles.

He forgot that the boardinghouse guests who came in after eleven at night were supposed to ring a special bell which

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sounded in Mademoiselle Otard's room. He rang the front doorbell violently, woke everybody up, and was given a most unfriendly welcome by the landlady, who had thrown on a coat over her nightgown.

"Today of all days!" he heard her muttering.

Madame Maigret had gone to bed, but she switched on the light when she heard steps on the stairs and gazed in astonishment at her husband, who seemed to be walking with exaggerated clumsiness and who tore off his collar with unwonted violence.

"Where on earth have you been?" she murmured, turning over toward the wall.

And he echoed her:

"Where have I been?"

Then he repeated, with a peculiar smile: "Where have I been? Supposing I've been to Villecomtois?"

She frowned, searched her memory, and felt sure she had never heard the name before.

"Is that near here?"

"It's in the Cher . . . Villecomtois!"

Better wait till next morning before bothering him with questions, she thought.

Whether at home or on her travels, whether she had gone to bed early or late (which seldom happened), Madame Maigret had a mania for getting up at an impossibly early hour. Maigret had already had an argument with her on the subject the day before, when he found her up and dressed at seven o'clock in the morning with nothing to do.

"I can't get used to staying in bed," she had replied. "I always feel I've got the housework to do."

And the same thing happened that morning. He opened an eye, at one moment, because the yellow glare of the electric light was shining into it. It was not yet daylight and already his wife was making timid splashing noises in the room.

"What was that name?" Maigret wondered, half asleep, realizing to his annoyance that he was getting a headache.

The name he had triumphantly announced to his wife the night before, the name of some village or small town, had obsessed him so much that, as often happens, he had forgotten it by dint of thinking of it.

He thought he had only half fallen asleep, for he was still con-

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scious of certain small facts; thus he noticed that the electric light had been switched off and that a bleary daylight replaced it. Then he heard an alarm clock ring somewhere in the house, somebody's footsteps on the stairs and the front doorbell ringing twice.

He would have liked to know if it was still raining and whether the storm had died down, but he could not bring himself to open his mouth and ask. Then suddenly he sat up, for his wife was shaking him by the shoulder; it was broad daylight; his watch, on the bedside table, showed half-past nine.

"What's up?"

"The local police Inspector is downstairs."

"What's that to do with me?"

"He's asking to see you."

Of course, because the night before he had maybe drunk a toddy too many—and that quite unintentionally—Madame Maigret felt bound to assume a protective and maternal air.

"Drink your coffee while it's hot."

On such mornings it's always a bore getting dressed, and Maigret almost put off the task of shaving to another day.

"What was the name I told you last night?" he asked.

"What name?"

"I mentioned a village . . ."

"Oh yes, I remember vaguely; it was somewhere in the Cantal—"

"No, no, in the Cher."

"D'you think so? I believe it ended in *on* . . ."

So she couldn't remember either. Well, it was no good worrying. He went downstairs still only half awake, his head heavy, and his pipe had not the same taste as on other mornings. He was surprised to find nobody in the kitchen or in the pantry; however, when he opened the dining-room door he discovered all the residents of the house sitting frozen into stillness as if for some ceremony, or to have a group photograph taken.

Mademoiselle Otard gave him a nasty reproachful look, doubtless because of his noisy entrance last night. The sad lady, in her armchair, was as remote as a dying woman who has lost touch with this world. As for the Mosselets, they must have quarreled for the first time that day, for they avoided looking at each other and seemed to be blaming the whole world for their row.

Even little Irma was not the same, and seemed to have been steeped in vinegar.

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"Good morning!" said Maigret, as cheerfully as possible.

Nobody answered, or made the slightest gesture in acknowledgement of his greeting. Meanwhile, however, the lounge door opened, and the police Inspector, looking pleased with himself, held out his hand to his illustrious colleague.

"Please come in here. I had an idea I should find you still in bed."

The door had closed again. They were alone in the lounge, where the fire had only just been lit and was still smoking. Through the window Maigret could see the gray quayside, still windswept, with clouds of spray flying from every big wave.

"Yes, I was tired," he grunted.

And seeing the Inspector's smile, he chose to show right away that he knew what the man was hinting at. He had not thought of one point last night, but now it occurred to him.

"Of course, your Gustave Broken-Tooth was there! So there was a policeman at his heels. And this policeman told you—"

"I assure you I had no intention of making the slightest reference to it."

Idiot! So he thought that if Maigret had spent the evening at the dance hall with those two girls, it was because—

"I've taken the liberty of disturbing you this morning because the Dieppe police have made a discovery which, if I may say so, is of a somewhat sensational character."

Maigret poked the fire, out of habit. He would have liked a drink, something refreshing, lemon juice for instance.

"Didn't you notice anything when you came downstairs?" went on the Inspector, who was in the seventh heaven, like an actor who has just been applauded tumultuously and who is about to deliver his best speech.

"Do you mean the people waiting in the dining room?"

"Yes. I was anxious to get them all together in one room and prevent them from coming and going. I've got a piece of news which may perhaps surprise you: the man or woman who murdered Jeanne Fénard is one of them!"

It would have taken more than that to stir up Maigret on a morning like this, and he merely stared at his colleague with a heavy, almost listless gaze. And the local detective would have been greatly surprised if he had known that at that precise moment what was worrying Maigret was to remember the name of a village ending in *ois*.

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"Look at this!—don't be afraid of touching it. The fingerprints, if there were any, have been washed away hours ago by the rain."

This was a small card with which Maigret was already familiar, an oblong, grayish card bearing the printed word *Menu* surrounded by decorative scrolls.

The letters written in ink had been almost obliterated by the rain, but it was still possible to make out: Sorrel soup . . . Mackerel with mustard sauce . . .

"That was the menu for the day before yesterday's dinner," he commented, still showing no surprise.

"So I have just been told. One thing is certain, then: this is a menu from the Otard boardinghouse, and a menu which was used the day before yesterday, namely the day before the crime. Let me tell you now that it was picked up this morning, by the merest chance, on the pavement in the Rue de la Digue, less than three metres away from the place where Jeanne was killed."

"Evidently!" grunted Maigret.

"You agree with me, don't you? You noticed that last night I was in no hurry to arrest Broken-Tooth, in spite of his past record, as some might have felt bound to do. My method, as I've told you, is not to hurry things at any price. The presence of this menu on the scene of the crime proves, in my opinion, that the murderer is staying in this house. And I'll go further! In the midst of the storm that's still raging this morning, I tried to reconstruct his actions. Imagine that your hands are wet with rain and that you've got to shoot straight. What do you do? You take out your handkerchief and wipe your fingers. As he took out his handkerchief, the murderer dropped—"

"I understand," sighed Maigret, lighting his second pipe of the day. "And have you also worked out the meaning of the figures written on the back of the card?"

"Not yet, I must confess. Somebody who was here the night before last must have used this menu to make a note of something. I can read the penciled figures: 79 x 140. And underneath that: 160 x 80. I thought at first that it might be the score of some game, but then I gave up that explanation. Nor can it be the time of a train or a boat, as had occurred to me. As far as that goes, the thing is still a complete mystery, but it is nonetheless evident that the murderer is one of the people in the boardinghouse. That is why I have collected everybody in the dining room under the eye of one of my officers. I wanted, before going any further, to

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ask you one question: "Since you were here the night before last, did you at any time during the evening notice anybody using a pencil to make notes on a menu card?"

No! Maigret had noticed nothing of the sort. He remembered that Monsieur and Madame Mosselet had played checkers on a small table in the lounge, but he had already forgotten where the rest were. He himself had read the paper and gone to bed early.

"I think," went on the Inspector, pleased with his little sensation, "that we can now examine our people one after the other."

And Maigret was still hunting for that wretched name, growing thirstier and thirstier, and sighing: "Not until I've had something to drink, please!"

He opened the communicating door and saw Madame Maigret, who had virtuously come to sit with all the rest. In the gray light, the atmosphere was that of a small-town dentist's waiting room. They sat behind half-drawn curtains, with sullen faces, not daring to stretch out their legs, surreptitiously exchanging cautious or mistrustful glances.

Madame Maigret could obviously have avoided this ordeal. But it was just like her to want to behave like everybody else, to take her place in the line, having armed herself with her knitting, which kept her lips moving in silence as she counted her stitches.

Out of politeness the Inspector had brought her in first, had apologized for bothering her again, and had shown her the menu.

"Does this remind you of anything?"

Madame Maigret glanced at her husband, shook her head, then reread the figures and frowned, as if reluctant to admit to a fantastic idea.

"Absolutely nothing," she said at last.

"The evening before last, did you see anybody scribbling on a menu?"

"I must admit that as I never stopped knitting I didn't notice what was going on around me."

While she was saying this she made a little sign to her husband. And he, realizing that she had something to add but that she would have liked to do so confidentially, said out loud nevertheless: "What is it?"

She felt annoyed with him. She was always afraid of making a blunder. Now she blushed, feeling intimidated; she hunted for words and apologized profusely.

"I don't know . . . I'm very sorry . . . Perhaps I'm wrong . . . But I

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immediately thought, when I saw those figures—."

Her husband sighed, reflecting that she was incorrigible in her touching humility.

"You'll probably laugh at me . . . A hundred and forty centimetres is the width of some dress materials. Eighty centimetres is the width of some others. And the first figure, seventy-nine, is the length you'd need for a skirt."

She felt quite proud as she caught a gleam in Maigret's eyes, and now she went on volubly: "The first two numbers, 79 x 140, represent exactly the amount of material needed for, say, a pleated skirt. But you can't get all materials in that width. For stuff that's eighty centimetres wide you'd need double the length to get in the pleats. I don't know if I'm making myself clear."

And turning to her husband, she exclaimed, "D'you think it could have ended in *ard*?"

For she was still hunting for that wretched name which she blamed herself for having forgotten.

"Yes, that's one of my house menus. But I didn't write those figures," Mademoiselle Otard replied to the Inspector's questions. "And I'd like to say that if my house is to be kept in a state of siege I shall be obliged to—"

"Please forgive me, Madame."

"Mademoiselle!"

"Forgive me, Mademoiselle, and I will do my best to cut this state of siege, as you call it, as short as possible. But let me tell you that we are certain that the murderer is a guest in this house and that in the circumstances we are entitled to stay—."

"I'd like to know who!" she retorted.

"So should I, and I hope that it won't be long before we find out. Meanwhile I have a few questions to ask you which did not occur to me during yesterday's upheaval. How long had the Fénard girl been in your service?"

"Six months," Mademoiselle Otard replied curtly.

"Will you kindly tell me how she came into your house?"

And the woman, perhaps because she felt Maigret's sardonic gaze on her, retorted, "Like anybody else: through the door!"

"I didn't expect a wisecrack at a time like this. Did the Fénard girl come to you through an employment agency?"

"No."

"She came on her own initiative?"

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"Yes."

"You didn't know her, did you?"

"I did."

She now answered with only the barely essential syllables.

"Where did you know her?"

"At home."

"Meaning?"

"She worked for some years at the Anneau d'Or, where I was cashier."

"Is that a restaurant?"

"A hotel restaurant."

"Whereabouts?"

"I've told you; at home, in Villecomtois."

Maigret had to restrain himself not to give a start. So that was the crucial name, rediscovered at last: Villecomtois, in the Cher! And at this point he forgot the promise he had made himself to stay in the background.

"Did Jeanne come from Villecomtois?" he asked.

"No. She just happened to turn up there, as a maid-of-all-work."

"Had she a child then?"

She retorted contemptuously: "That was seven years ago, and Ernest is four."

"Seven years since when?"

"Since I left to settle down here."

"But what about her?"

"I don't know—."

"If I understand you rightly, she stayed there after you had left?"

"I suppose so."

"Thank you," said Maigret in the threatening tone of a lawyer who has just been cross-examining a reluctant witness in court.

For form's sake the Dieppe Inspector added: "So in fact, she turned up here this summer and you engaged her on recognizing a girl from your part of the world, or more exactly a girl whom you had known at home? I understand your action. And it was all the more generous in that, for one thing, this Jeanne had a child, and for another, her manners and her behavior were not exactly in keeping with the reputation of your boardinghouse."

"I did what I could!" was all Mademoiselle Otard would say.

A minute later it was Mosselet's turn to come in, a cigarette between his lips, his expression sly and condescending.

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"Still at it?" he asked, perching on the corner of the table. "You must admit that for a honeymoon trip—."

"Did you write this?"

He turned the menu over and over between his fingers, and inquired: "Why should I be drawing up menus?"

"I'm talking about the pencil notes on the back."

"I hadn't noticed . . . Sorry . . . No! It wasn't me. What's this all about?"

"I suppose you didn't see anybody writing on one of the menu cards the evening before last?"

"I must admit that I wasn't watching."

"And you didn't know Jeanne?"

Then Jules Mosselet raised his head and said simply: "How d'you mean I didn't know her?"

"I mean you didn't know her before you came here?"

"I had seen her before."

"In Dieppe?"

"No! At home."

The name was going to recur! Maigret, although a silent actor in this scene, was as jubilant as though he had been its hero.

"Where is your home?"

"Villecomtois!"

"You are from Villecomtois? Do you still live there?"

"Of course."

"And you knew Jeanne Fénard there?"

"Everybody knew her, seeing she was the maid at the Anneau d'Or. I knew Mademoiselle Otard too, when she was cashier there. And that was why, when we came through Dieppe, my wife and I, we thought we'd be better off staying with somebody from our own part of the world."

"Your wife is from Villecomtois too?"

"From Herbemont, a village five miles away. Comes to the same thing! When you're travelling you may as well do a good turn to people you know. And so when Mademoiselle Moulineau was ill—"

Maigret had to turn his head away not to smile, and this movement, as he realized, offended the Inspector, who could not understand it. So all the characters involved in this Dieppe affair were from Villecomtois, a remote village of which nobody had spoken until now!

Maigret reflected: "It's pretty sure that the friend who gave my

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wife this address must come from Villecomtois too!"

As for the local Inspector, completely baffled, he tried to maintain his dignity as he mumbled, "Thank you. I shall probably need you again. Please ask your wife to come in."

As soon as Mosselet's back was turned, Maigret picked up from the table the menu which provided such crucial evidence, slipped it into his pocket and laid a finger on his lips as though to tell his colleague, "Don't mention this to her."

Madame Mosselet took her husband's place with the dignified air of a woman for whom the law holds no terrors.

"What is it now?" she asked.

The Dieppe detective, deprived of the menu card, was at a loss what to say. He began: "Do you live at Villecomtois?"

"Villecomtois, in the Cher, yes. My father bought the Anneau d'Or hotel there. He died, and I was left on my own and needed a man to run the house, so I got married . . . We closed down for a week for our honeymoon, but if this sort of thing is going on . . ."

"Excuse me," interrupted Maigret. "You were married at Villecomtois?"

"Of course."

"How far is it from the nearest large town?"

"It's forty-three kilometres from Bourges."

"Was it at Bourges, then, that you bought your trousseau?"

She stared at him for a moment in amazement. She must have been wondering: "What business is it of his?"

Then, with an imperceptible shrug, she replied, "No. I'm going to buy my trousseau in Paris."

"Oh! So you're going to finish your honeymoon in Paris?"

"We were going to start it there. But I wanted to see the sea. So did Jules. We had never seen the sea, either of us. If it hadn't been for the rate of exchange we might have gone on to London."

"So you brought as little luggage as possible with you. I see your point. In Paris, you'll have plenty of time to fit yourself out."

She could not understand why this man, who was as broad and solid as a wardrobe, insisted on talking about such futile things. And yet he went on, puffing gently at his pipe: "It'll be particularly convenient since you've practically got a model's figure. I bet you're size twelve."

"A biggish twelve. Only as I'm rather short I have to have my dresses taken up."

"You don't make them yourself?"

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"I've got a little dressmaker whose work is as good as anybody's, and who only charges—"

At last she was struck by the abnormal character of this interview, and stared at the two men; she saw Maigret smiling and the other, rather ill at ease, seeming to wash his hands of the business.

"But what's all this about?" she suddenly asked.

"How much material would you need, one metre forty wide, to make a skirt?"

She was unwilling to answer. She did not know whether to laugh or to be angry.

"For a single skirt-length, seventy-eight or seventy-nine centimetres, wouldn't you?"

"So what?"

"Nothing. Don't worry. Just an idea of mine. We were talking about dresses, my wife and I, and I said you'd be easier to dress than she is."

"What else do you want to know?"

She was glancing toward the door, as if afraid that her husband might take advantage of her absence to be off on some escapade.

"You are absolutely free to leave. The Inspector is much obliged to you."

She went out, still uneasy and anxious, with the suspicious look of some women who are so convinced of human perfidy that they cannot imagine they've been told the truth, even by chance.

"Can I go into the town?"

"If you want to."

When the door had closed again, the Inspector got up, intending to rush into the dining room and order a policeman to follow her.

"What are you doing?" asked Maigret, going over to the stove which he had not poked for a long time.

"But I assume—"

"You assume what?"

"You're not going to tell me. Remember, she was the one who gave us the weakest evidence yesterday. According to her, she went out to follow her husband, but she asserts that she mistook a stranger's figure for his and, after following it, came home disappointed. All this business about dress materials—"

"Exactly!"

"Exactly what?"

"I tell you these notes on the menu card prove that she is not

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guilty, that no woman in the house is guilty, and that's why it's unnecessary to interview the 'sad lady'—that's what my wife and I call the schoolteacher. Remember that a woman carries her own measurements in her head and knows the width of materials well enough not to need to note them down. If, on the other hand, she has asked a man to buy something of the sort for her, or if that man wants to give her a surprise—"

He pointed to the old copies of *La Mode du Jour* on the table.

"I'm willing to bet," he said, "that we should find in here the pattern that took Madame Mosselet's fancy. She and her husband must have discussed dress materials. The husband made notes, with the intention of giving her a present. It's specially important for him to be nice to her because, as we've been told, she's got the money—that's to say, the Anneau d'Or hotel. He was picked because she needed a man about the house, and also, no doubt, because Madame Mosselet belatedly developed some romantic feelings. But she must keep a tight hold on him. She watches him. He comes here to stay with an old acquaintance without suspecting that Mademoiselle Qtard has taken in an unfortunate creature who also once lived at Villecomtois."

It was still raining. Transparent drops chased one another down the panes. From time to time a black mackintosh went past on the pavement, hugging the wall.

"It's none of my business, is it?" went on Maigret. "But I didn't get an entirely favorable report on this woman Jeanne from those girls last night. She wasn't a nice type of girl. She was cantankerous, embittered by her misfortunes. She hated men, blaming them for her downfall, and she always managed to make them pay. For she was one of the rare habituées of the dance hall who was willing to spend the rest of the night out . . . Rum toddies may stupefy one, but not as much as you seem to think."

The other man felt ill at ease, remembering his behavior that morning, his mocking, supercilious smile when Maigret had appeared.

"You can see the course of events for yourself. You'll discover that Jeanne, back home, was the mistress of this Mosselet, who's quite nasty himself. You'll find out that he was the father of her child and that she has had more cuffs from him than thousand-franc or even hundred-franc notes. Then she suddenly sees him turn up here with a wife rolling in money and jealous as a tigress. What does she do?"

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"Blackmails him," the local Inspector sighed regretfully.

And Maigret lit a fresh pipe, his third, muttering, "It's as simple as that. She blackmails him, and as he's scared of losing not his love but his bread-and-butter—"

At that moment he opened the dining-room door and saw them all, still sitting in their places, as if they were at the dentist's.

"Come here, you!" he said in a changed voice to Jules Mosselet, who was rolling a cigarette.

"But—"

"Come on, now!"

Then to the policeman, who was nearly six feet tall: "You come in too."

And finally he gave the local Inspector a look which meant: "With that sort of fellow, you know—"

Mosselet was less bumptious than he had been earlier, and seemed almost ready to hold up his arms to ward off blows.

Maigret was anxious to keep out of it. The women, on the other side of the door, jumped as they heard voices raised, vehement protests, and then strange bumping noises.

As for Maigret, he was looking out of the window. He was thinking that perhaps the Newhaven boat would leave at two. Then, by a curious association of ideas, he reflected that he'd have to go and have a look at Villecomtois one of these days.

When he felt a tap on the shoulder he did not even turn round.

"Is it okay?" he asked.

"He's confessed."

Maigret was obliged to stay a minute longer looking out of the window so as not to let the local Inspector see his smile.

Sometimes it's better not to seem too clever.

(translated by Jean Stewart)

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

JACK RITCHIE's "The Midnight Strangler"

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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Jeffery Rand, the Double-C man when he was head of the Department of Concealed Communications, is brought out of retirement "just once more" (you'd better not believe it!). He and his wife Leila go back to Egypt on one of the most mysterious and melodramatic assignments of Rand's counterespionage career. "Sudden death was a hazard of the game, Rand knew, but that didn't make the danger any more acceptable" . . .

THE SPY IN THE LABYRINTH

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The first thing a traveler usually noticed about Egyptian belly dancers was that they wore body stockings—a holdover from the puritanical rule of President Nasser. At least that was the first thing Scotty Jung noticed as he lounged at the bar of Sahara City, a night club exotically located in a giant tent just beyond the Pyramids. Seeing Sahara City and remembering his own Pyramid adventures of some years back, Jeffery Rand would have been startled and just a bit dismayed. Scotty Jung had no such problem. He was only 26 years old and this was his first visit to Egypt. He accepted the tented night club in the desert just as he accepted the Pyramids themselves.

Scotty had become something of a world traveler since he'd fled from the United States in the closing days of the war protests. He'd got in deeper than he'd ever planned when he set a bomb in a Florida draft board that killed the building's janitor. The fact that Scotty hadn't meant to kill anyone, that he'd been physically ill for three days after realizing what he'd done, would have carried little weight with the authorities. He was a fugitive now, a hero among the underground groups, though with the coming of

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peace and the resignation of Nixon the general public had almost forgotten his name.

Some others had forgotten too, like Linda, the girl he'd been living with at the time. When he fled to Canada and then on to the Middle East, she promised to join him. He waited a whole year believing that promise until someone in the underground sent him a newspaper clipping announcing her marriage to a young systems engineer at IBM.

This past year, first in Turkey and then in Jerusalem, Scotty had managed to live by his wits. He'd stayed out of Turkish prisons and had spent several months living with a charming young typist who was quite willing to support him. When that broke up he'd drifted to Cairo. He had no doubt that the next adventure was no farther away than the pretty blonde now sitting at the bar.

"Your first time here?" she asked suddenly, perhaps aware that his eyes were on her.

"Yes. I've only been in Cairo a few days."

"Oh, you're American!"

"And you're British. I guess there's no hiding it."

They laughed and he offered to buy her a drink. She seemed about his age and said her name was Atlanta Chessman. She also said yes to the drink.

"Atlanta. Back in the States I lived in northern Florida not far from Atlanta."

"I was named after the ocean," she said with a smile, "not the city."

"Are you here alone?" A tent in the middle of the desert hardly seemed a likely singles bar.

"I'm traveling with my brother. We had a toy business back in England, but we fell on hard times."

"Happens to everyone," he assured her. "What sort of toys?"

"Dolls, games—almost anything."

After a second drink he asked, "Can I drive you home from here? I have a rented car outside."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Only Americans would be foolish enough to rent a car in Cairo! It's almost suicidal, the way Egyptians drive. For a few extra dollars you could hire a car and driver."

"I didn't know that. But the offer's still open."

Her eyes seemed to be searching the crowd. Suddenly she said,

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"There's my brother—come meet him."

Richard Chessman was tall and slim, with deep-set eyes that gave his face an aggressive appearance. Scotty Jung disliked him almost at once, though Richard was pleasant enough to him. "Enjoying the belly dancers?" Richard asked as they shook hands. "Of course they're better in Beirut."

"And in Istanbul," Scotty agreed. "These are a bit hefty for my taste."

"You men!" Atlanta complained, leading him away. "Have you seen the sound-and-light show at the Pyramids yet?"

"I haven't seen anything, but I'd certainly like a guide."

"Very well," she agreed willingly. "Come on, then. We should be just in time for the English language commentary. They do it in English, French, German, and Arabic each night."

Scotty followed her outside and then stood for a minute watching the lights playing on the nearby Pyramids. "It's still a bit far to walk," he decided. "Let's take the car."

But when they were inside she stayed his hand on the ignition. "Let's just watch the lights for a while. We've got time."

"Sure. Whatever you say."

She turned her lips to his and kissing her he thought about driving her back to his room near Ramses Square. The Pyramids could wait for another night.

Suddenly the door opened and Richard Chessman slid into the car with them. "There's something we want you to do for us, Scotty," he said quietly.

For the first time since Rand's retirement from Concealed Communications, he and Leila were having his former superior, Hastings, to dinner. Thinking back to their telephone conversation, Rand couldn't quite remember how it had come about, but he had half a suspicion that somehow Hastings had managed to invite himself.

"Lovely place you have here," the intelligence chief said over coffee, "and the dinner was delicious. I should visit you more often."

Leila and Rand exchanged glances. "We're so far out in the country," she said. "I'm afraid we're losing touch with all our London friends. With my teaching and Jeffery's writing—"

"Ah, yes—how is the book coming, Rand? Giving away all our secrets?"

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"Hardly." Rand shifted uneasily in his chair, knowing that the real reason for Hastings' visit was about to be revealed.

"There are two weeks yet before the autumn term begins. You two should get away somewhere."

"Oh?" Leila perked up. "And where would you suggest, Mr. Hastings? Moscow again?"

"No, no! That Moscow business was unfortunate. I was thinking of Cairo. You haven't been back since your marriage, have you, Leila?"

Rand saw the flicker of pleasure mixed with suspicion cross her face. He knew she'd half regretted not going to Cairo on their honeymoon, and they'd talked casually about making the trip earlier this summer. The damp autumn weather had set in sooner than was expected this year, which was another reason for Leila to wish for the warm sands of her homeland. And yet—

"Give it to us straight," Rand said, voicing her suspicions. "What's in Cairo?"

"It's *who*, not what."

"Then who's in Cairo?"

"Richard Chessman and his sister. Remember that business with the toy company last winter?"

"How could I forget!" Rand poured some more coffee. "They got away from you that time. What are they up to now?"

"That's just it—we don't know! I can't send anyone officially, but you're in a unique position to help us, Rand."

"They both know me."

"But they don't know Leila."

"Let's keep it that way. You seem to forget that when we married I retired from Double-C—she didn't join up."

Hastings sighed and took a sip of coffee. "Just once more, Rand, and I won't bother you again. You'll both get a free trip to Cairo."

Rand turned to his wife. "It's up to you, Leila. What do you think?"

She looked into his eyes, found her answer there, and said, "I'd like to see Cairo again."

"Good!" Hastings exclaimed. "How soon can you leave? Tomorrow?"

Rand smiled and shook his head. "Still the same old Hastings, aren't you? Give us forty-eight hours at least."

"Thirty-six. I can get you on a plane Thursday morning. And you'll be back in plenty of time for the autumn term, Leila."

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"I hope so. I'll admit it will impress my archeology students to tell them I'm just back from the Pyramids."

"Where will we find Chessman and his sister?" Rand asked.

"She's been seen with an American fugitive named Scotty Jung, wanted back in the States for a terrorist bombing. He has a room off Ramses Square and it seems they're living there together."

"Why don't the Americans have him arrested?"

"Extradition is always difficult from those Middle-Eastern countries, even when they recognize it by treaty. Besides, we're more interested in the Chessman connection just now. They're up to something."

"We'll see," Rand said. His thoughts were already in Egypt, where he and Leila first met years ago.

Scotty Jung awakened and opened his eyes, immediately aware that he was alone in the bed. Though it was barely daylight, Atlanta was up preparing breakfast. He listened to her moving around the tiny kitchen, imagining how she looked in the sheer silk kaftan he'd bought her with his advance from Richard. Thinking of Richard, he suddenly remembered what day it was.

"How's it going?" he asked, coming out to the kitchen.

She glanced up from the toast she was buttering. "Good morning. I didn't want to disturb you, but I must be on my way. I'm meeting Richard at eight."

"When will you be back?"

She hesitated. "I'm not certain. Tonight or tomorrow."

After breakfast she was gone and he had the whole day ahead of him. He decided to spend it at the Pyramids again. They'd gone to the sound-and-light show twice in the week he'd known Atlanta, sitting through all four performances with successive narrations in English, French, German, and Arabic. This was because Richard had told Atlanta he wanted Scotty to spy on a certain Ali Zamal, who presented the nightly taped commentaries and sometimes gave special talks in Arabic. Zamal was a short swarthy man who wore a business suit and a red fez. Scotty might never have looked at him twice had not Atlanta pointed him out. "That is Zamal," she whispered on the first night at the show. "He's a dangerous man."

He considered his situation often in the days that had followed. Richard and Atlanta had recognized him from some old newspaper photos and arranged to meet him. They knew he'd killed a

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man back home, and knew they could use him for their own purposes. There was little danger of Scotty turning them in to the police, even after Atlanta told him they wanted him to kill Zamal. But he still looked forward to his eventual return to America at some time when past events would have drifted into the forgotten pages of history. Now Richard wanted him to kill a man, and he wasn't at all certain he could do it.

He spent most of the afternoon wandering around the Pyramids, watching groups of American tourists being photographed. Some climbed bravely onto the back of a tired-looking camel while the camera clicked, and Scotty felt a special fondness for them. Foolishly dressed in their garish sports shirts and bulging pants suits, they were still his countrymen.

"That camel looks mean," a young woman at his side remarked.

"He looks more tired than mean," Scotty said. "You know when they're mean."

She tossed the dark hair out of her eyes and smiled at him. "I see you're a camel expert. And an American too."

"Does it show?" Somehow this reminded him of his meeting with Atlanta Chessman only a week before. He studied the young woman intently. She was older than Atlanta, perhaps around 30, and certainly not British. Egyptian, he guessed.

"I like Americans," she replied. "Is this your first time in our country?"

"It is. And you're Egyptian?"

"Partly. I teach at the university." She held out her hand. "I'm Leila Gaad."

He accepted the hand, finding it soft but strong. "Scotty Jung," he said, certain the name would mean nothing to her. "What brings a native out here on a hot afternoon?"

"Archeology is my subject. I like to come here for a bit of a refresher every few months."

He smiled at her. "Speaking of refreshers, Sahara City's just down the road and their bar is open. Can I buy you a drink?"

She consulted her watch, hesitated, then said, "That would be lovely."

The restaurant beneath the huge tent was crowded for the cocktail hour, with tourists mingling freely among a scattering of local residents. Leila Gaad said, "I don't usually drink this early in the day, to say nothing of drinking with a stranger."

He smiled. "We introduced ourselves, didn't we?"

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But there was something about the woman that made him uneasy. He'd picked up girls in bars and on street corners all through the Middle East, and he knew the way it was supposed to go. This wasn't going right. He was sorry he'd told her his real name.

After a half hour of aimless chatter she excused herself. "I have to make a phone call but I'll be right back. Don't go away."

"I won't."

He watched her cross the empty dance floor and thread her way between the tables. Whoever she was going to call, he had a hunch it wouldn't be good for him. He paid the bill and started for the opposite entrance. Ali Zamal, the man in the red fez, was standing there watching him. Scotty glanced the other way as he walked past. He drove back toward the city, going over in his mind the instructions for that evening which he'd received from Richard. It took him an hour to accomplish what he had to do.

It was dark by the time he returned to his apartment, having made his way through the city's back alleys to shake off any possible followers. He went quickly up the steps and unlocked the door. Inside, he realized he was not alone. There was a sob from a darkened corner of the room. Scotty froze, wishing he had a weapon.

"Who's there?" he asked softly.

The sob came again, and as his eyes became accustomed to the dark he saw Atlanta Chessman hunched in a corner. He ran to her and knelt down. "What is it? What are you doing here, Atlanta? I thought you were away."

She clung to him, her face terrified and tear-streaked. "They've shot Richard," she sobbed out at last. "I think he's dead."

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs—in the car. I was afraid to stay with him. They're after us both."

"Who is?"

"Ali Zamal's people."

"Stay here. I'll go down and have a look."

Scotty went down the back stairs, moving cautiously when he reached the street. The little car was in the place she always left it, and he went to it at once. Richard Chessman was crumpled on the floor of the back seat, his shirt soaked with blood. He was more dead than alive and Scotty drew back helplessly, not knowing what to do.

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Suddenly a man he'd never seen before was at his elbow, shoving him aside. Scotty wanted to run, but if the man was a police officer he knew it was too late for that. "Chessman!" the man said, bending over the crumpled figure on the car floor. "Can you hear me?"

Scotty saw the dying eyes flicker open. "What . . . ? Rand, is that you? Am I back in London?"

"You're in Cairo, Chessman, and you're dying. Who shot you?"

Chessman gasped and tried to speak again, but his mouth filled with blood. The words wouldn't come. With a final gesture he tapped the breast pocket of his shirt, then sagged back as if crushed by a great weight.

"He's dead," the man named Rand said. Already he was reaching for the pocket that Richard had indicated. He took out a folded piece of paper, glanced at it in the dim light, and pocketed it.

"Who are you?" Scotty asked. "Police?"

"I knew Chessman in London. I think we'd better talk. You could be in big trouble."

Rand had gone searching for Scotty Jung as soon as Leila reported losing him. Finally he'd staked out the apartment near Ramses Square. He hadn't seen Atlanta go in the back door, but when Scotty arrived he saw that. He'd been checking out the rear parking area when Scotty emerged again and went to the car. Rand knew it was some sort of luck that had brought him to the dying Chessman, but he didn't know if it was good luck or bad.

Atlanta faced him now in the upstairs apartment, her face puffy and tear-streaked. "You again! Was it you who shot Richard?"

"Hardly."

"What is all this?" Scotty demanded. "Who is this guy?"

When Atlanta didn't answer, Rand replied for her. "Their father operated a private intelligence-gathering organization in London until he was killed. I'm retired from British Intelligence and they hired me for a time as a cipher expert."

"What are you doing here?"

"On holiday with my wife."

"And doing a little snooping for British Intelligence?" Atlanta asked, beginning to recover herself.

Scotty Jung interrupted. "He's after me. He came to my apartment."

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"I'm not after anyone," Rand tried to convince them. "I just want to know what's happened. Who killed your brother, Atlanta?"

"Probably one of Ali Zamal's men. He was shot by a sniper as he was getting into our car at the airport parking lot. We'd just flown back from a meeting—" She broke off suddenly, aware that she was saying too much.

"You have to tell me," Rand urged. "Richard is dead downstairs. You could be next."

"I can't say any more."

"You and Richard are still working for the highest bidder, aren't you? Who is it this time—the Arabs or Israel? And who is Ali Zamal?"

"He works at the Pyramid sound-and-light show," Scotty answered.

"That's enough, Scotty," she warned.

"You should know," Rand told her, "that the Egyptian police can be very hard on murder suspects—especially when espionage is suspected."

"Do you think I killed my own brother?"

"They might ask why you drove around while he bled to death in the back seat."

"I was terrified, hysterical! I was afraid to stay at the airport and afraid to drive to a hospital. I came here to find Scotty."

"Where had the two of you been?" Rand asked.

"We flew to Amman," she said at last. "To meet a man named Rangoon." Turning toward Jung she added, "I wasn't sure when Richard planned to come back. I thought he might want to stay overnight."

"But when you did return this evening a sniper was waiting at the airport?"

"Yes. I believe he meant to kill us both."

"Tell me about Rangoon."

She shrugged. "He's paying us a great deal of money."

"For what?"

Another hesitation, and a glance at Scotty Jung. "To kill Ali Zamal. That's where Scotty fits in. We told him first that it was only a spying job, but then we told him the rest of it."

"I see." Rand felt tired. There was always someone new, someone young like Scotty, who could be hired to do the killing. "Where will it all end now, Atlanta?"

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"With Ali Zamal. I won't need Scotty. I'll kill him myself."

Rand remembered the piece of paper he'd taken from Richard's pocket. He opened it and studied it again in better light. On it were four lines enclosed in a maze-like frame:

LABYRINTH
LABYRINTHE
LABYRINTH
82

"Any idea what it means?" Rand asked her. "Richard was indicating it when he died."

"It's only doodling," she replied. "It means nothing."

"What is the labyrinth?"

"I don't know."

"What does 82 mean?"

"If it means anything he didn't tell me."

Rand turned over the slip of stiff paper. The message was on the back of Richard's airline boarding pass, but that told him nothing. "All right. Call the police and tell them about your brother. I don't care what sort of story you make up, but leave me out of it. And stay away from Ali Zamal for now—both of you."

Scotty Jung nodded, but Atlanta only turned away.

Rand returned to their hotel room to find Leila on the sofa. "I'm such a failure, Jeffery. Were you able to locate him?"

He poured them both a drink and told her about it. "He and Atlanta were at his apartment. Richard's there too, but he's dead."

"Dead!"

"Someone shot him at the airport. Atlanta let him bleed to death in the back of their car. I found him just in time to get this before he died."

He showed her the slip of paper. "Some memo or note in his pocket. He pointed to it just before he died. Know any labyrinths around here?"

"Of course," she replied, surprising him. "The labyrinth at Arsinoe is just south of here." She studied the paper and smiled. "About 82 kilometers south of here, in fact."

"Interesting. Do archeologists do their digging there?"

"Not any more. Only the foundations survive. The most interesting fact about it is that the ancient name for Arsinoe was Crocodilopolis. Isn't that a wonderful name for a city?"

"Not exactly the sort civic boosters would suggest."

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"It was probably the most famous labyrinth of antiquity. Herodotus said it contained twelve courts and 3000 chambers, half of them below ground for the tombs of kings and the sacred crocodiles. It was most likely built as a tomb, though some historians believe it may have served as a secret meeting place for political leaders."

"If we decided to drive there could you find it in the dark?"

She smiled at the question. "Unless it's moved after 4300 years. It's about an hour's drive from here."

"Richard was trying to tell me something about the labyrinth. But what? You say nothing's left of it but the foundations."

She picked up the slip of paper again. "Why did he write the word three times—and once with an *e* on the end? And the 82 at the bottom. It all must mean something."

"You told me that was the distance to the labyrinth."

"Yes, but why did he write it at the bottom like—" Her frown gave way to a slow smile. "Oh, Jeffery, it's wonderful! I should have worked with you at Concealed Communications!"

"You mean you see something that I'm missing?"

"Of course! He's written the word *labyrinth* in three languages—English, French, and German. It's nearly identical in all three."

Rand still didn't get it. "And the number?"

"He wrote down the number—the distance to Arsinoe—because he didn't know the Arabic word for labyrinth. Don't you see? It's an *Arabic* number, like all our numbers! Four lines, four languages—English, French, German, and Arabic. And what does that bring to mind?"

"The sound-and-light show at the Pyramids!"

"Exactly."

"Come on," Rand said. "There's still time to catch the end of tonight's performance."

The order of the multi-lingual narrations was changed nightly and they arrived to find that the French commentary was just ending. The spotlights that played on the Pyramids were dimmed and the audience was filing out. A short man in a red fez was changing the lettering on the announcement board, indicating that the German commentary would be coming next.

"Let's go in," Rand said.

They took their seats amid a scattering of tourists. He noticed

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two Japanese gentlemen in the row ahead and wondered if they understood German. Presently the man in the fez took his place at the microphone and turned on some soothing Eastern music. Then he began to speak rapidly in German.

"Something's wrong here," Leila whispered in his ear. "They usually just play a tape of the lecture in the appropriate language."

"Can you understand what he's saying?" Rand asked, but even he had caught the word *labyrinth*.

The two Japanese men sitting ahead of them suddenly rose and headed up the aisle toward the rear exit. "What do you think is happening, Jeffery?"

"This show is being used as a staging area for some purpose. The spoken narration before the tape recording tips them off as to where they're going next—in this case, the labyrinth at Arsinoe. That was the meaning of Richard's memo. He'd noticed the word *labyrinth*, used by the speaker in all three languages he understood."

They left their seats and moved up the darkened aisle after the two Japanese men. But by the time they reached the parking area it was only to see a little car disappearing down the highway. "We'll never catch them at night," Leila said. "They could turn off anywhere."

"Is that the road to the labyrinth?"

"They could go that way, yes. It lies near the city of Al-Fayyum."

Rand was aware that the voice of the German narrator had changed, but it didn't occur to him that the tape was now playing until he saw the short man in the red fez coming up behind Leila. "You departed from my show with great haste," he said. "We should speak of this."

He held out his hand as if to shake Rand's in greeting, and too late Rand saw the spring knife shoot from his sleeve. It moved toward him like an adder, striking for the kill, when suddenly another shadowy figure appeared from the darkness and collided with the man in the fez. There was a brief tussle as they hit the ground together, then stillness. As the light show began, Rand saw the face of his rescuer in the reflected glow from the great Pyramid. It was Scotty Jung.

"Good to see you again, Scotty." He glanced down at the ground. "Did you kill him?"

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"No, only knocked him out." Jung turned and recognized Leila at once. "I should have known you were with him."

"She's my wife. Now suppose you tell us who this fellow is."

"Ali Zamal, the man they wanted me to kill."

"I see."

"I guess I'm not much at killing—at least not with my bare hands. Let's get out of here."

Rand made a quick decision. Whichever side Jung was on, it was better to keep him in sight. "Come with us," he urged. "We're driving to the labyrinth at Arsinoe."

"Tonight? What for?"

"To find out, among other things, why Ali Zamal tried to kill me just now."

Leila drove, because she knew the roads, while Rand and Jung sat in the back seat where they could crouch down out of sight quickly if another car overtook them. "Where is Atlanta?" Rand asked when they'd been on their way about ten minutes.

"She took the car somewhere, with her brother's body."

"To the police, I hope."

"I don't know."

"How do you fit into this whole picture?"

The American leaned back and closed his eyes. "Sometimes I wonder about that myself. I killed a man back in the States, with a bomb. It was part of an anti-war protest and I didn't mean to injure anyone, but that didn't matter. I've been running ever since, living by my wits, taking on a few dirty jobs just to stay alive. Cairo seemed as good a city as any, until I met Atlanta. Oh, she was fine but her brother was trouble. Right away he tried to recruit me for some dirty work. He wanted me to spy on Ali Zamal and find out what he was up to. Then Atlanta asked me to kill him for them."

"Did you agree?"

"Not at first, but Atlanta was wearing me down. They knew all about my background—they'd recognized me from a photo—and knew I couldn't turn them in. It was a kind of blackmail, I suppose."

"What about this trip to see a man named Rangoon?"

"Rangoon is the C.I.A.'s chief undercover agent in the Middle East. He was supposed to return to Cairo with the Chessmans tonight but he changed his plans."

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"I see. Then Atlanta and Richard were working for the C.I.A.?"

"For whoever paid them the most. Richard told me sometimes they worked for both sides at the same time."

As they drove on through the darkness, heading south across the desert toward Al-Fayyum and the ruins of Crocodilopolis, Rand imagined another car with Atlanta Chessman at the wheel, bearing her dead brother toward some unmarked grave. Sudden death was a hazard of the game, Rand knew, but that didn't make the danger any more acceptable.

"Soon," Leila said presently. "We're at the outskirts of Al-Fayyum now."

Rand could see little but darkness out the car windows, broken now and then by lamplight from some house they passed. Presently the houses became more numerous, but Leila avoided the center of town to take them a little to the west. It was almost midnight when she finally parked the car and announced, "The ruins are just over the next rise. I'd suggest we go the rest of the way on foot if you expect to spy on anyone without being seen."

Rand and Jung followed her advice, leaving the car and trailing behind her on foot as she led the way up a sand dune. The moon was almost full, and from the top of the dune they could look down at a stretch of palm trees lit by the moon's silver glow. "The ruins of the labyrinth are just beyond the trees. You are standing now in the ancient city of Crocodilopolis."

"Where were the crocodiles?" Rand asked. "Are we close to the Nile?"

"The Nile is nearly forty kilometers to the east, but several streams and a canal flow through here, connecting the river with Lake Moeris to the north. Yes, there were sacred crocodiles in the lake at one time. There still are, occasionally, though the Aswan Dam has pretty much ended the seasonal flooding of the Nile at this point."

"Crocodilopolis," Scotty Jung said, speaking the name softly. "The City of Crocodiles."

Suddenly Leila's hand was on Rand's shoulder. "Look there, in the *moonlight*!"

He followed her gaze and saw two men moving among the trees. One of them carried what might have been a rifle. "You two stay here," he said. "I'm going down."

Before Leila could protest he was gone, slipping along the sand to the shelter of the palm trees. As he drew closer the moonlight

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revealed a low man-made structure, half buried in the ground. He could see a sign by an entrance, printed in the usual four languages. With some difficulty he read the lines in English, using a match to augment the moonlight: *Opening soon—a modern reconstruction of a portion of the labyrinth at Arsinoe. Made possible by funds from the Egyptian State Tourist Administration.*

The match flame singed Rand's fingers and he let it drop. Almost at once a voice behind him said, "We meet again, Mr. Rand. But this time I have a gun instead of a knife."

Rand turned slowly to face Ali Zamal and the sten gun he held steadily in one hand. There was no arguing with it. "I thought I left you back in Cairo."

"The journey is very swift by helicopter. Now please raise your hands and step inside ahead of me. You'll find a friend of yours already present."

Rand opened the door and stepped down into the reconstructed maze. The place was a long, dimly lit corridor with passages and rooms going off on either side. Glancing in as they passed, he could see more doorways, more passages, leading in all directions. They passed a niche where a realistic stuffed crocodile waited to greet tourists with its gaping jaws.

"To the left," Ali Zamal instructed as they reached a corner. "Then to the right."

"You know your way through here."

"I helped design the reconstruction. In here now."

Rand entered and found two other Arabs standing beside a chair. Atlanta Chessman sat in it, tied hand and foot. She raised her eyes when she saw him. "Rand."

"Atlanta! How did you—?"

Ali Zamal snorted. "She tried to kill me because she thinks I shot her brother. I brought her along in the helicopter."

"What is all this?" Rand asked. "What's going on here?"

It was Atlanta who answered. "A meeting—a meeting of terrorist leaders from around the world. Germans, Japanese, Irish, Palestinians. All the bombers and plane hijackers and assassins. He wants to unite them into a worldwide terrorist network."

Ali Zamal stared down at her. "Shut up," he said quietly.

"That's why Rangoon was coming—to try and break it up. But something happened at the last minute. He was tipped off there'd be an assassin waiting. There was—only he killed my brother instead."

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Ali Zamal slapped her across the face with his open palm. "You've said enough. As for your brother, you'll soon be joining him."

Rand took a step forward and one of the Arab guards raised his weapon. That was when they heard the first explosion.

Ali Zamal wheeled and shouted something in Arabic. The guards took off, running. There was the clatter of machine-gun fire, echoing through the labyrinth's corridors, and then another explosion.

Suddenly Scotty Jung appeared with a sack of grenades over one shoulder and a sten gun in his hands. "Let's get out of here!" he shouted to Rand. Ali Zamal raised his own weapon but he was too slow for the American. The sten gun's bullets cut through his middle and he toppled against the chair where Atlanta was tied.

Rand knelt to cut her free, and then they were running with Scotty, making their way back through the maze. "How can we find our way out?" Atlanta gasped.

"I left a trail of sand. We're following it now," Scotty told her.

"Where'd you get the gun and grenades?" Rand asked.

"Your wife and I found a helicopter behind the dune. The stuff was in there, and I figured you might need help."

"You figured correctly."

Atlanta twisted her ankle and fell. Rand paused to help her up just as a Japanese rounded the corner behind them. Scotty fired a short burst from his weapon. "You two go on," he said. "I'd better stay here."

"You can't—"

"There are probably twenty of them in this maze. It's better if none of them gets out. Go on now! Leila's waiting outside."

Rand put his arm around Atlanta and helped her the rest of the way. The last he saw of Scotty Jung the American was hurling another grenade into the depths of the labyrinth. They just made it into the moonlit night when a quick series of explosions seemed to rip the place apart, throwing them to the sand.

Leila found them a few seconds later. "Jeffery! Are you all right?"

"Good enough, I guess. Atlanta twisted her ankle, but she's all right."

Atlanta Chessman stood up uncertainly, gazing back at the smoke and fire so close behind them. "Scotty."

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"I'm sorry," Rand said. "He didn't make it. Let's get back in case there are more explosions."

They went a little farther but then she dropped to her knees in the sand, sobbing for Scotty as she had for her brother.

"He said to give you this," Leila told Rand. "It was a note he wrote just before he went in after you. I don't think he planned to come out."

"No," Rand said. "He wouldn't have."

"Aren't you going to read it?"

"I think I know what it says, Leila. Richard Chessman knew about the labyrinth—remember the writing on his boarding pass?—so there was no reason for him to want Scotty to spy on Zamal, then to kill him. It was only a cover story so his sister wouldn't know the truth—that he was working for both sides. He knew about the labyrinth and the messages in the sound-and-light show because Zamal told him. And what about Scotty? He supposedly didn't know when Richard and Atlanta were getting back from Amman—but in the back seat tonight he told me the C.I.A. man named Rangoon was supposed to return to Cairo with them this evening. Don't you see? Rangoon got lucky, and Richard died instead, probably thinking Zamal killed him."

"What do you mean, Jeffery?"

He unfolded Scotty's last note and they read it together by the light from the burning labyrinth.

Rand—You're a good guy, so I'm leaving you this. Richard hired me to assassinate Rangoon, the C.I.A. man, at the airport tonight. Ali Zamal was paying for it, but Richard didn't want Atlanta to know. He wanted me to do it instead of some hopped-up Arab who might hit her with a stray bullet. Only I was the wrong guy for it. I don't really know if I would have shot Rangoon or not. The longer I waited there with the rifle, the more Richard became the real villain in my mind. When they went to the car, Rangoon wasn't with them and I shot Richard instead.

"Q"

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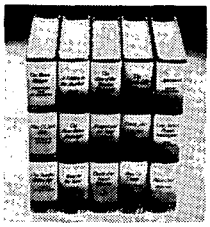

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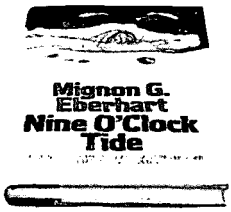

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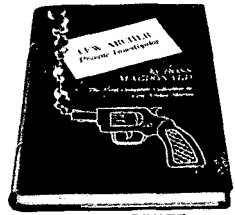

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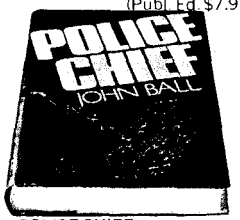

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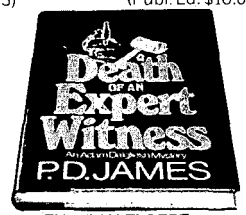

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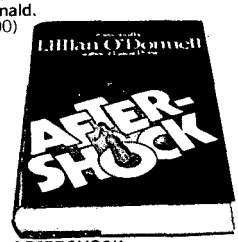

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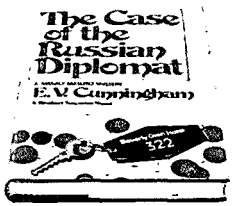

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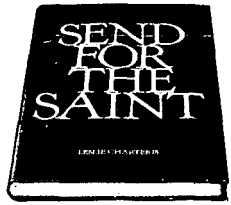

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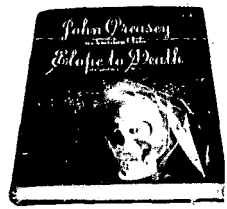

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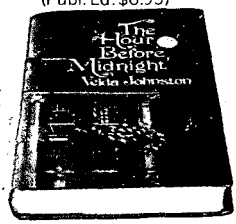

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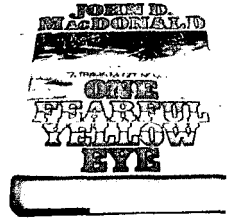

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